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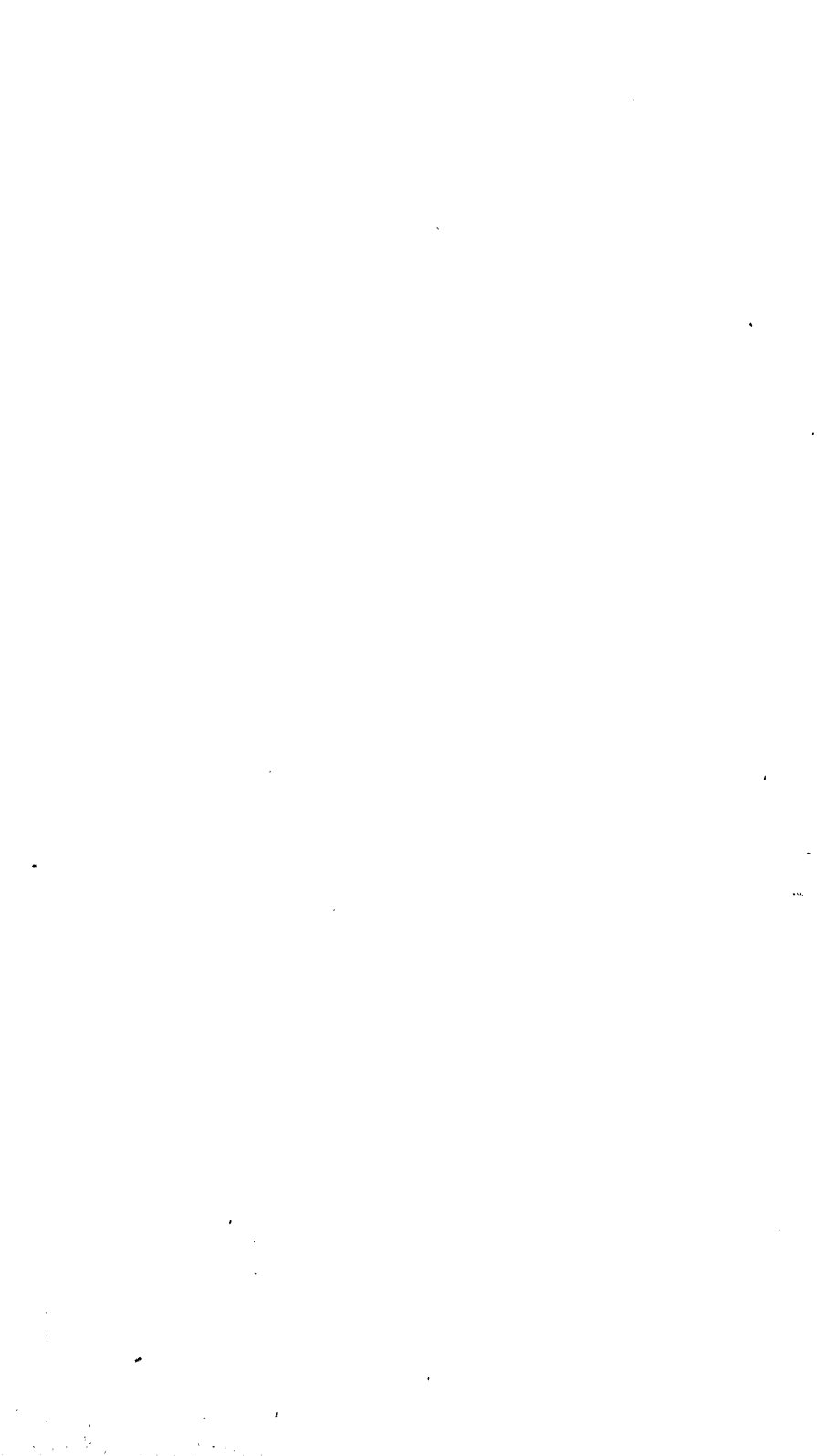
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# THE RELIGION OF MANIPUR

BELIEFS, RITUALS AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

67947



SAROJ NALINI PARRATT

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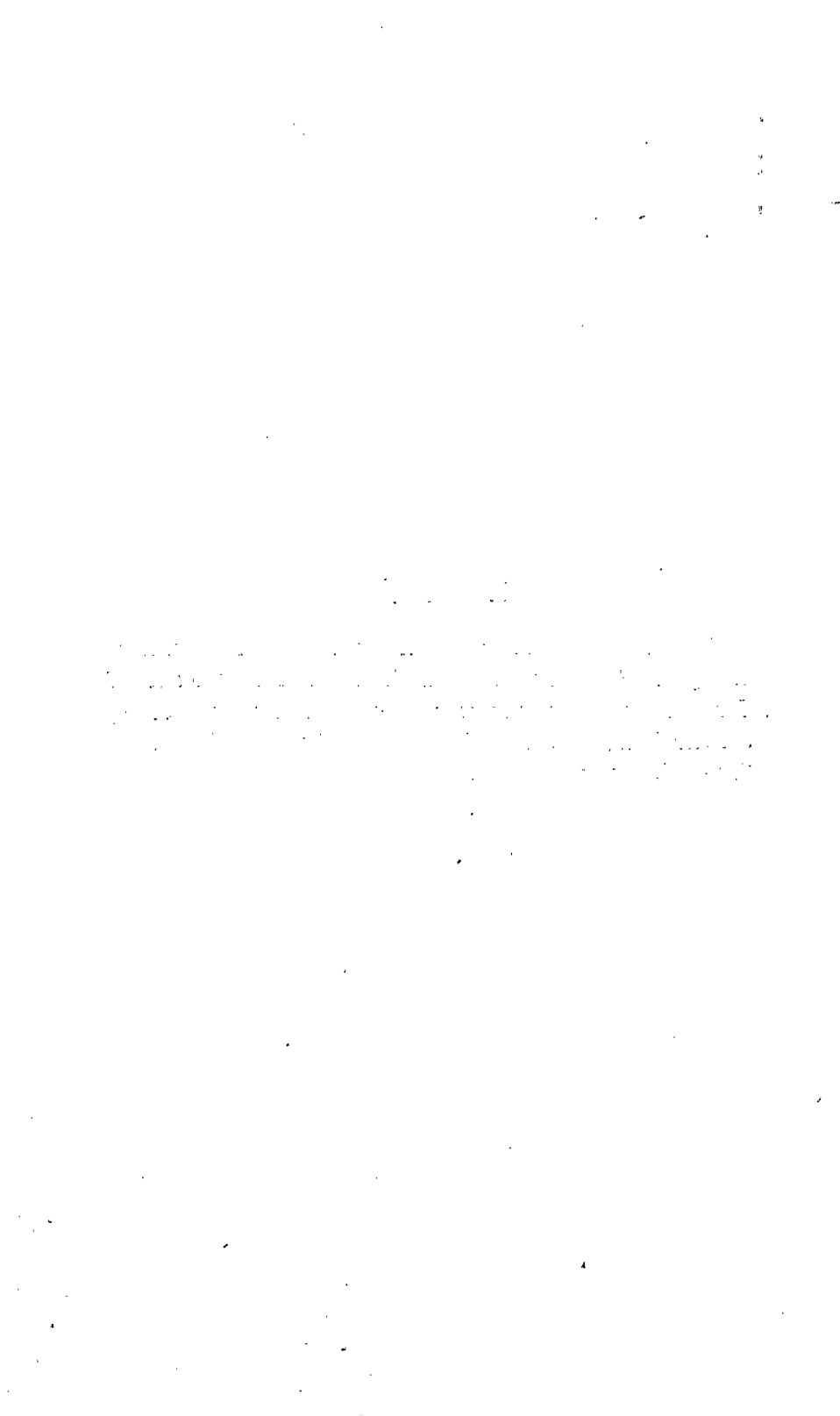
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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to the memory of my parents, Ibungohal Arambam, who taught me to love Truth and of Binodkumari who was an example of perseverance and of my brother Sarat, so gifted and creative a writer, who died while this book was being written.



## ABBREVIATIONS

- BK** *Bamon Khunthok* (The Migrations of the Brahmins). In MS form only.
- OK** *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (State Chronicles) edited by L. Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelachandra Singh, with an introduction by E. Nilakanta Singh, Imphal 1967.
- NL** *Ningthourol Lambaba* (Royal Chronicles) edited by O. Bhogeshwar Singh, Imphal 1967.
- Census** *Census of India 1961*. Except where otherwise stated the reference is to Vol. XXII, part VII-b : *Manipur : Fairs and Festivals*, edited by R. K. Birendra Singh.
- HERE** *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by J. Hastings.
- MED** *Manipuri to Manipuri and English Dictionary* by N. Khelachandra Singh, Imphal 1964.

### Notes :

To reduce the number footnotes all references are quoted by author, date of book or article as listed in the bibliography and page number.

Except where otherwise stated all dates are in the A. D. era

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## Foreword

Dr. Parratt has certainly made a substantial contribution to learning. She has revealed a capacity to relate her topic of research to the broader framework, both of the discipline within which it falls (viz., Indology, with special reference to Indian History, Culture and Religion) and its related disciplines (e.g., Anthropology, Ethnology, Sociology etc.)

I have found this book to be a very well-ordered piece of research, which breaks new ground in a most interesting field of study which has already drawn the attention of quite a number of scholars and specialists, but none of them has taken it up to treat the matter so systematically. It is refreshing to find that the writer is singularly free from any special bias or *parti pris*, although it is obvious that her sympathy is with the atmosphere, the form and spirit of present day Meithei religion as a form of Hinduism as it is practised. Evidently she has full personal knowledge of this religion with its ideologies and rituals as well as its "spiritual" value and aesthetic beauty. I note also that she agrees with me that "Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Meithei religion with its Gods and Goddesses and Myths, its Legends and Traditions, its Social Customs and Usages and its Priests and Ceremonials, and of Brahmanical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna". Incidentally I may also note one thing. From my visit to Manipur and my close contact with a number of Manipuri scholars, writers and artists, I have noted that the Manipuri people have a very estimable sense of love and pride in their own cultural *milieu*: they greatly love their language and are proud of it, as it has been proved by the astonishing extent as well as quality of their literature for the last few hundred years, which is remarkable for a small population of a few



hundred thousands only : they love their dances and their rituals, their old songs and legends which they have raised to the domain of a very high artistic expression which has been now widely accepted by the rest of India : and that they have a remarkable power of assimilation of the deeper and the more beautiful aspects of Hindu thought and culture, while preserving things of artistic value in their own culture, and seeking to sublimate their old ideals to the higher domain of Hindu philosophy. One feels that in this book the writer has manifested this spirit in her presentation.

There is a most important section on the life of the *Maibis* and *Maibas* who were the priestesses and priests of the old Meitheireligion now forming an integral part with the Brahmans and the Vaishnavas of present-day Manipur Hinduism. This part shows full originality, as evidently the writer has given the results of her personal knowledge and her own experience of these festivals and rituals. Consequently, this section has great originality, and is a distinct addition to our knowledge of Manipuri culture.

The section on the *Maibis* and *Maibas* is most interesting and informative ; and with more materials at our disposal the question of the relationship of the *Maibis* with the *Lais* or the Gods who "possess" them, will become very intriguing. There are similar ideas of sex relation between a human being and a God or Goddess which is found in other religions also.

Part III gives a Historical Development of the Religion in Manipur. The writer divides this development into three periods—the early period, the pre-Hindu period (as she calls it—from 1467 to 1698), and the Rise of Vaishnavism in the 17th-18th centuries, with a final synthesis in the 18th-19th centuries.

The early period has been connected with the missing Phayeng copper plates, which enthusiasts would take to the end of the 8th century A. D. This would be rather a very old and quite a positive date for the Hinduisation of the Meitheis people. Dr. Parratt has given a good study ( so far

as available ) of these lost copper-plates, and has given a full translation of these as published by Mr. Yumjao Singh in 1935. I am glad to find that she is quite correct in her attitude of scepticism about the datation of these plates and their value, and she thinks—in the absence of the original plates, which are now missing—that they cannot be, from their contents and their style, earlier than the middle of the 19th century. The more recent developments of Manipuri Hinduism, specially in Chaitanya Vaishnavism from Navadwip in Bengal becoming the accepted official religion of the Manipur Court and People, as well as certain side-lights into other aspects of Hinduism ( e.g., the worship of Siva and Durga ) are also discussed, as interesting and valuable forms of the Hindu religion which are becoming more and more popular.

We have thus in this book from all aspects, a very good study of the subject, with the materials available to us, presenting a well-reasoned account of the religious and cultural situation of the Manipuri people. This book brings new facts, and systematises old facts already obtained ; and the writer gives her own interpretation in a reasoned manner. She shows both a very good knowledge of the original Manipuri sources which very few non-Manipuris can aspire to possess, and at the same time she has a proper scientific attitude in interpreting them.

National Library Campus,  
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January, 1976.

SUNITI KUMAR CHATTERJI



## Introductory Words by the Author

The text of this book is a slightly revised version of a doctoral thesis submitted to the Australian National University in 1974. It is based on detailed field work undertaken during 1971-72 and archival research in London in addition to the period of study in Canberra.

To write about one's own culture inevitably has its pitfalls, but it is my hope that I have managed to be objective both in description and interpretation and that my use of the Manipuri sources will open up new areas of information for Indologists. In this connection I must acknowledge the vast amount of pioneer work which has been carried out by other Meitei scholars, especially to the late L. Ibungohal Singh, Professor E. Nilakanta Singh, N. Khelachandra Singh, Ng. Kulachandra Singh, R. K. Jhalajit Singh, Dr. Kunjabihari Singh, and many others, too numerous to mention by name, also to the Manipuri Sahitya Parisad which has done so much to stimulate the study of Manipuri Literature and traditions. Though there may be points in this book at which I have felt obliged to disagree with one or other of these scholars on points of interpretation I gladly acknowledge the very great volume of their studies without which my own work would have been infinitely more difficult. I am especially indebted to Professor A. L. Basham, who supervised the writing of the original thesis with such patience and thoroughness—it was for me a privilege to be permitted to study under his guidance; to the late Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji who graciously gave of his wise advice and vast knowledge both in the writing and the examination of the

thesis : to Professor Eugenie Henderson and Dr. de Casparis for additional helpful comments ; and finally to my husband for his continued encouragement and help throughout the writing of the book. My greatest debt however is to the people of Manipur who have kept alive and preserved our unique and profound cultural heritage despite the many and various pressures to erase it. Here I must especially acknowledge my very great indebtedness to these practising *māibis* and palace pundits who graciously shared with me their profound knowledge of Manipuri traditional religion. It is my hope that this book will also help to stimulate the ongoing task of preserving all that is good in Manipuri culture.

## Preface

The religious life of the hill peoples of North-eastern India, even when they have come much under the influence of Hinduism and are nominally Hindus, retains many characteristics inherited from their prehistoric ancestors. Most of these peoples have no written records going back earlier than the nineteenth century, and their earlier history and culture has to be pieced together from oral tradition, anthropological and archaeological data, and the accounts of travellers. Manipur, however, forms an exception to this generalization. The Meitei language was reduced to writing, and chronicles and religious texts were written down by the learned men of Manipur long before the other peoples of the area became literate. Thus it is possible to reconstruct the earlier history of Manipur with greater precision than that of any other area of the region. Unfortunately few people except the Manipuris themselves have bothered to master the language sufficiently to be able to read this considerable literature, and the few who have done so have been interested rather in its language than in its content. Exceptional in this respect has been the great polymath, the late Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji ( who incidentally, was one of the examiners of the thesis on which this book is based ), who made a thorough study of Meitei literature and wrote something about it from the cultural and religious point of view. Few people from outside the state, however, will ever master the difficult language sufficiently to read its earlier literature, which differs considerably in vocabulary and syntax from modern spoken Meitei. Thus the future of Manipuri studies must depend very largely on the Manipuris themselves.

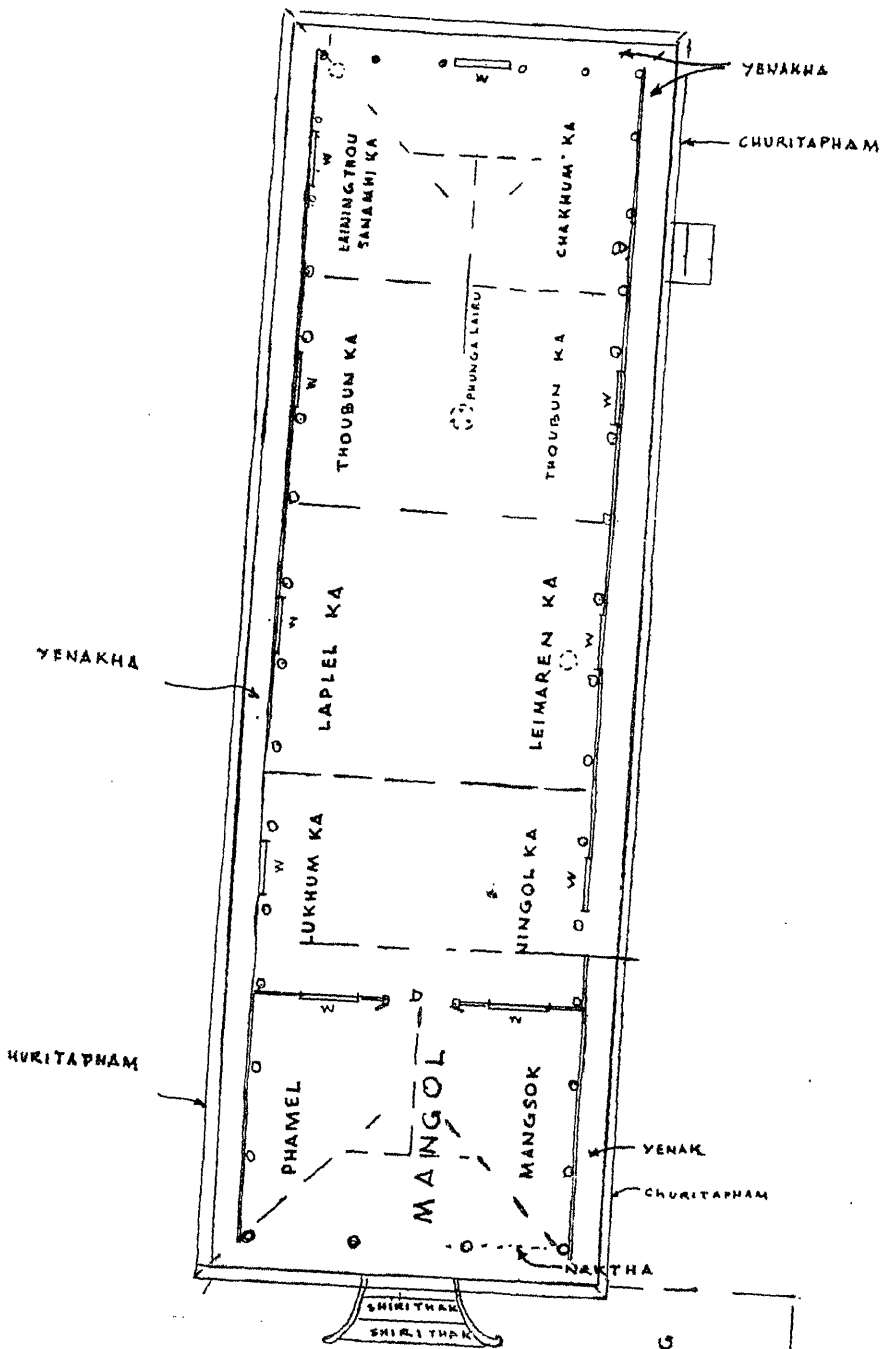
A few local scholars have already done something in editing manuscripts and compiling histories on their basis, but much remains to be done. The book which I have the honour of introducing is a most important contribution in

the field of Manipuri studies. Its author has brought to bear modern techniques of historical research and anthropology upon her sources, and has produced a survey of traditional Manipuri religion which carries the study much further than any earlier work on the subject.

The student of Indian religions will find in this book a well written yet scholarly account of how Hindu theology and cultic practices were implanted on a civilization quite different in race and character. The same thing happened in many parts of Southeast Asia at an earlier time, but in that region Hinduism survived only in the Island of Bali. In Manipur it still flourishes, and the synthesis of the Indian and the local genius has produced one of the most beautiful traditional schools of religious dancing in the world. I hope that this study will be followed by further works on the same and related themes, both by Dr. Parratt herself and by other Manipuri scholars.

Canberra 1977

A. L. BASHAM



CHURITAPHAM

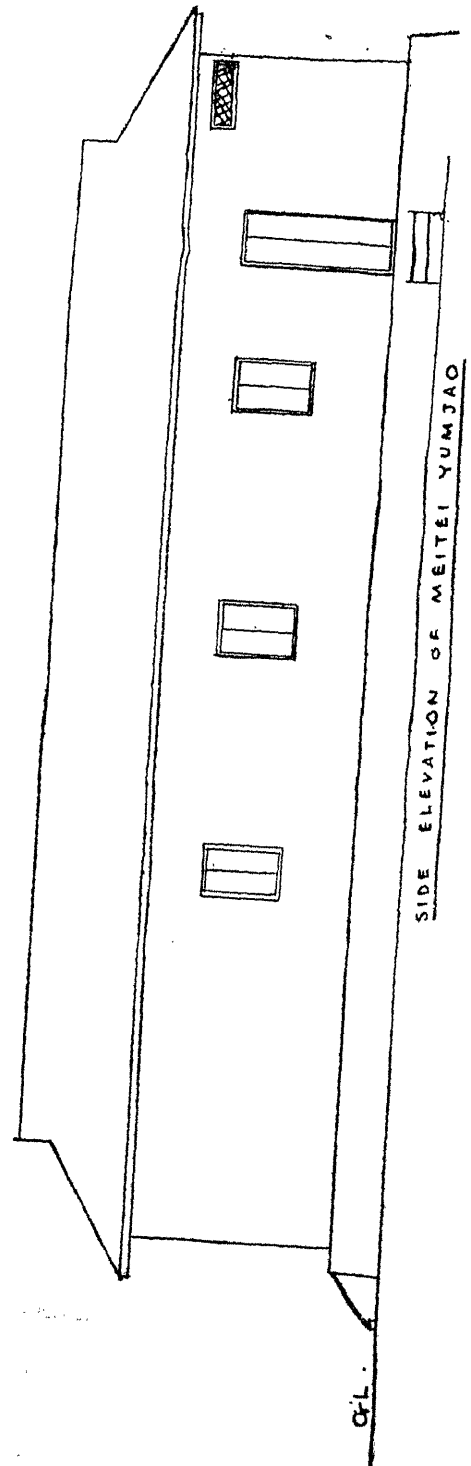
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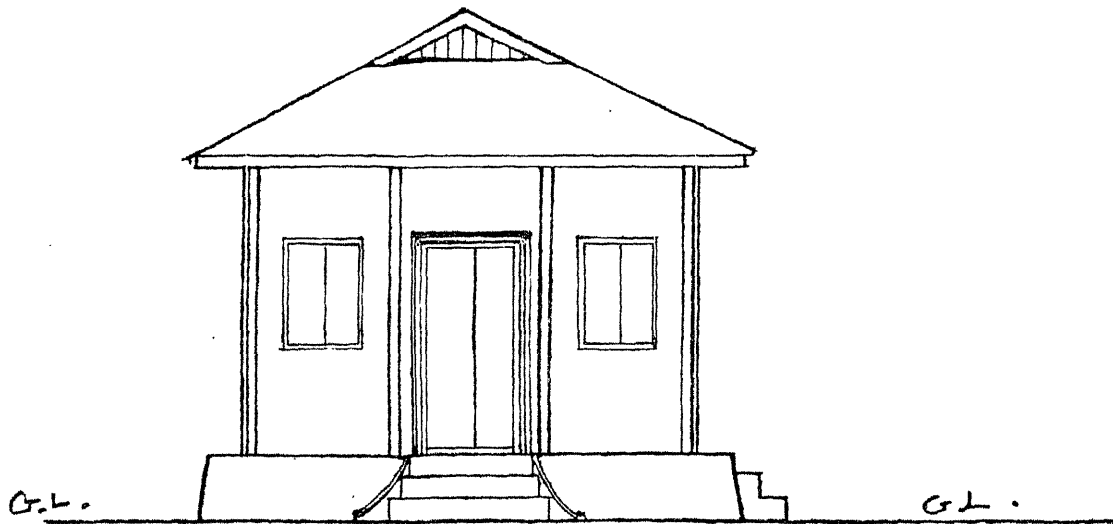


PLAN OF MEITEI YUMJAO

NOT TO SCALE

DRAWN BY. M. MADHUSUDAN SINGH.





FRONT ELEVATION  
OF  
MAITEI YUMJAO

## INTRODUCTION

Dandekar (1969 : 240) has remarked that Hinduism has shown an almost infinite ability in the toleration of other religious ideas and practices, a tendency to assimilate and incorporate rather than to eliminate and displace. In this book one particular example of this process will be described, the case of Manipur, a small and compact area lying between the Naga Chin hills and Burma.<sup>1</sup> The existing faith with which Hinduism came into contact here was, despite some superficial similarities with Burmese religion, quite distinctive. It had its own gods and priests, its own rites and festivals, which preserved a religion rich in mythology and colourful in ritual. The essentials of this religion remain recognisable to the present day. The type of Hinduism with which it came into contact was again distinctive, namely that particular kind of Bengali Vaishnavism associated with the school of Caitanya. It is this meeting of two quite different and distinctive religious faiths which will be discussed in the following pages.

Other religions, it is true, entered Manipur from time to time. Muslims were among those captured by King Khāgamba at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when he repelled an invasion from the west (OK pp 21-22) [1606 A.D]. These Muslims were settled as a separate community in the Valley, and were joined from time to time by other Muslims who came as peaceful settlers. As the Manipuri name for Muslims is *pangāl*, which is derived from the word for Bengal, we may assume that these migrants of a different faith were named according to their place of origin.

Of Buddhism there is almost no trace in Manipur, a fact which is all the more surprising in view of Manipur's close proximity to Burma and frequent contact with that country.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Manipur has an area of roughly 8500 square miles, and a population (according to the 1961 Census) of around 7,80,000, of whom about half are Manipuris.

<sup>2</sup> But see below Chapter 8(c).

Christianity was a late comer to the region and, despite its high degree of success among the hill peoples, has had practically no effect on the Manipuris of the plain.<sup>3</sup>

The origins of the Manipuris are altogether obscure. Grierson was of the opinion that the Manipuri language fell into the general Tibeto-Burman group, but expressed some doubts as to the adequacy of Kuki-Chin to delineate the subgroup to which this language belongs (Grierson 1967 : III, iii, 20). Physically the Manipuris are distinctively Mongoloid in appearance, which suggests that their origins should be sought further east. Some of the early British observers, such as Brown, Dunn and Johnstone, on the contrary, thought they discerned certain "Aryan" features in the people, and this idea has been taken up by those Manipuri writers who are anxious to establish an Aryan pedigree for them.<sup>4</sup> To complicate matters further there are quite distinct cultural connections between the Manipuris and the Tangkhuls, which can scarcely be accounted for simply as borrowing.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of clear data from the point of view of physical anthropology it is hardly possible to assess the merits of these theories. What is clear however is that, whatever their origin, the Manipuris have evolved a distinct culture of their own which bears little relationship to those of any of the groups from which they are claimed to have originated.

The Manipuri nation was a kind of heptarchy. According

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3 Downs (1971 : 73-81 and 156-183) gives a full account of Christian missions in Manipur, which largely affected the hill areas.

4 A limited attempt to establish a connection between the Meiteis and the Aryans may be seen in such writers as W. Yumjao Singh (1966) and L. Ibungohal Singh (1963). The most remarkable claim for Aryan (Vedic) origins for the Meiteis may be found in the voluminous writings of F. Atombapu Sharma. While one may admire this writer's deep knowledge of Sanskrit, his attempt to draw parallels at so many points between the Meiteis and Vedic culture (even to the extent of claiming that the Vedas began in Manipur) is too much like special pleading to be convincing.

5 Tangkhul costume is used in a number of the rites : see below Chapters 3(c), 8(c).

to the records at the beginning of the Christian era there were seven distinct tribes, called in Manipuri *yeks* or *sabais*, each occupying a different part of the valley and having its own ruler (*ningthou*, i.e. king).<sup>6</sup> Eventually the Ningthouja *yek* subjugated the rest and the Ningthouja *ningthou* became the supreme ruler. The exact date at which this happened is not clear, but the process of subjugation was evidently not complete by the beginning of the fifteenth century A.D.<sup>7</sup> The name Meitei originally applied to the Ningthouja *yek* alone, and became a term applied to the Manipuris as a whole only after this date.

During the earlier period migrants were in general assimilated and assigned to one or other of the *yeks*, no doubt according to the area in which they settled. Their origins were remembered however in their family names, and by the terms *nongchupharam* (migrants from the west) and *nongpokharam* (migrants from the east) respectively. Subsequent immigrants—mainly Brahmins and Bishnupurias (low-caste Hindus)—became to some extent integrated into the Manipuri community but were not assigned to a *yek*. While the *yeks* became welded into one nation they remained distinct entities, and today they have a basic part in the social structure of the Manipuris. Their importance is very great in determining marriage patterns,<sup>8</sup> and in time they came to be roughly equivalent to the Brahmanical gotras.<sup>9</sup>

The *yek* was subdivided into *sageis* or *yumnaks*. These were basically clan groups which traced descent from a common ancestor and bore the same family name. The *sagei* has its own deity (the *sageilai*) whose ritual worship will be

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6 The seven *yeks* were: Ningthouja (Meitei), Angōm, Khuman, Moirāng, Luwāng, Sarang-Leisangthem, Khāba-Ngā̄rba. The last two were almost certainly originally four separate clans. The geographical areas which each *yek*-occupied have been reconstructed with a fair degree of probability by Jhalajit Singh (1965: 14).

7 See below Chapter 7, n. 3.

8 See below Chapter 5, n. 4.

9 See below Chapter 9, n. 36.

described below.<sup>10</sup> The head of the *sagei* was called the *piba*.<sup>11</sup> This office was occupied by the eldest male and determined by the rule of primogeniture.<sup>12</sup> The *piba* had certain privileges, such as exemption from the *lalup* (forced labour demands).

The whole nation was subdivided into four *panas*,<sup>13</sup> which were geographical divisions of the Valley. Each *pana* was obliged, when its turn came, to provide an unpaid labour force to the king. The introduction of the *pana* system is generally attributed to King Loiyamba, who reigned during the eleventh century A. D.

Outside the Manipuri community were the villages of the Loi, who may have been the aboriginal inhabitants of the land prior to the arrival of the Meiteis.<sup>14</sup> The Loi have generally resisted the advance of Hinduism. Although the Loi have generally been a subject people to the Meiteis, some of their customs are very similar, and the possibility of a common origin cannot be ruled out. The Loi community has been enlarged by migrants of various ethnic origins (especially *mayangs*, westerners) and hill people. Exile to Loi villages, either permanently or temporarily, was a traditional punishment for Manipuris who had committed crimes against the king and state, and in later times became roughly equivalent to outcasting for Hindu Manipuris. Thus there is a good deal of aristocratic Meitei blood among the Loi.

The sources for the study of Manipuri culture fall into two broad groups : those in the vernacular and those in English. The latter group consists in the main of the observations and accounts of British political agents. Of particular importance are the accounts of Pemberton (1835), McCulloch (1859), Brown (1874) and Dun (1886). During the present century the numerous articles by Shakespear show a considerable acuteness

10 Chapter 4(a).

11 pi=mother ; pa=father.

12 Although this rule seems to be relaxed to a certain extent ; pibaship sometimes goes to the eldest suitable male.

13 Named Naharup, Ahallup, Khabam and Laipham respectively.

14 Professor Gordon Luce has suggested, in a personal communication, that the Loi may have been a branch of the Sak-Kantu.

of observation. The monograph of Hodson (1910) deserves the credit of being the first (and only) attempt to write a full-scale ethnography of the Meiteis, but is in many points lacking in accuracy and based on second-hand information. More recently the Indian indologist, S. K. Chatterji, has contributed to our understanding of Manipur within the wider context of the Indian sub-continent (Chatterji 1950 : 1962 : 1967), and Manipuri writers are also beginning to produce useful books in English (L. Ibungohal Singh 1963 : Jhalajit Singh 1965).

The Manipuri sources are more difficult to assess, mainly because of the difficulty of dating them accurately. These are all in the archaic Manipuri script.<sup>15</sup> Some attempt is now being made by the Manipuri Sahitya Parisad to render these books into modern Manipuri.<sup>16</sup> While several of these manuscripts seem to have little value, others appear to have been based securely on historical fact and provide the basic raw materials for the reconstruction of Manipuri history. The most important of these is the royal chronicles, the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. This book traces the history of Manipur from A. D. 33, which is the date assigned to the ancestor of the Meiteis, Pakhangba, up to modern times. The dates are given according to the sakābda era. The earlier part of the *OK* can scarcely be regarded as historical, although it contains much that is useful. It is couched in legendary terms, and is often obscure and epigrammatic in character. The *OK* itself indicates that this particular section of the book has been re-compiled from notes, and dates this compilation during the

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15 On the archaic script see Grierson's (1967 : III, iii) : Grierson's information was deficient in a few details ; see L. Ibungohal Singh (1963 : 58-62).

16 Modern Manipuri is now written in the Bengali script which was introduced in the wake of Vaishṇavism in the time of King Garib Niwaz during the first half of the eighteenth century. Tradition has it that many manuscripts in the archaic script were burnt at this time at the instigation of the king in an attempt to eradicate the pre-Hindu sacred books. In general it may be said that the basic difference between archaic and modern Manipuri is one of script, although there are numerous archaic words and modes of address no longer used.

reign of Bhāgyāchandra (second half of the eighteenth century A. D.).<sup>17</sup> With the reign of Kyāmba (A. D. 1467-1508) the chronicle becomes much more detailed and reliable. This king is credited with the introduction of the *cheithāba* system<sup>18</sup> according to which the year was accurately dated by naming it after a particular individual. This improvement in dating is closely reflected in the *CK*. The chronicle now comes to be more accurately kept, contains many more details of events and, what is more significant, it is explicitly dated according to the name of the *cheithāba* and the *sakābda* year: the month and day of the month on which each event occurred are also recorded. It is difficult to escape the conclusion (supported by Professor E. Nilakanta Singh in his introduction to the book, p. 3) that Kyāmba's reform in the calendar also involved the beginning of the official keeping of the chronicle, and that the events after this time were recorded soon after their actual occurrence. It should be noted that there are also considerable stylistic differences between the chronicle prior to the account of Kyāmba's reign and subsequently.

It seems reasonable therefore to regard the *CK* as essentially accurate for the period from the time of Kyāmba on.<sup>19</sup>

17 *CK*, p. 9. This states that Bhāgyāchandra appointed, in 1780 A.D., his brother Ananta Shai to re-edit those portions of the *CK* lost or damaged during the Burmese devastations: since this note is inserted at this point in the narrative, just before the accession of Kyāmba, we may assume that it is this portion to which the comment alludes.

18 See below, Chapter 3(b).

19 The *CK* finds some confirmation from outside evidence. From the time of Garib Niwaz, for example, the Burmese sources used by Harvey (1925) and Hall (1964) confirm the narrative at several important points.

There is some confirmation of eclipses mentioned in the *CK*. A random sample from the earlier period gives the following close proximity of dates:

<i>CK</i>	<i>British Astrological Association Catalogue</i>
Lunar eclipses:	
1666-7    Dec./Jan.	11th Dec. 1666
1688-9    Mar./April	15th March 1688
1691-2    Feb.	2nd February 1692

Consequently considerable use has been made of the chronicles for the historical reconstruction of the religion of Manipur.

A second set of chronicles, the *Ningthourol Lambūba*, is more difficult to evaluate. Although broadly in chronological order the *NL* is couched, in its earlier parts, in highly poetic language,<sup>20</sup> and contains a very great number of aetiological legends. It is not composed in the same strict historical framework as the *CK*, and therefore, while it may be used to supplement the latter at various points, it has not been taken as the basis for historical judgments. Besides these two full length works we have a number of very much shorter books. Some of these are virtually lists : the most important of this class is the *Bāmon Khunthok* (Immigration of the Brahmins), which contains details of the names, places of origin, and dates of immigration of the various Manipuri Brahmin families. Certain other short historical works such as the *Tākhelngamba* (Conqueror of the Tipperas—an account of Garib Niwaz's victory over Tippera) and *Bhāgyāchandra Maharāj Gānga Chatpa* (Pilgrimage of King Bhāgyāchandra to the Ganges) show all the appearance of having been written soon after the events they describe and seem therefore reasonably reliable. There is then a good deal of material available in Manipuri

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Solar eclipses :

1688	Mar./April	30th April 1688
1691	Feb.	17th February 1691

In two of these cases the day of the week differs slightly.

20 The following free translation of one of the earlier parts of the *NL* illustrates the style of the writers :

“My song begins: *hāya*. Your glories shine, brave ancestor, as in a mirror : father of the heavens above, giver of the three-fold universe, beneficent to mortals, chief of all *lai*, you who are young and fresh now as ever you were in the distant past. With unworthy lips I, your servant, I, the ancestress of the *hāyi* age, will recite those things I have known from my youth. Chief of all *lai*, all that concerns you, from birth to death, let me expound lamenting ; as one who steers a boat let me declare the course of your life, Sovereign,—all your deeds, from generation to generation.” (*NL*, p. 9)



which, rightly evaluated, provides the raw material for the study of the history of Manipur.

In the following pages these sources will be used to supplement material gathered from periods of field work in Manipur. In Parts I and II the non-Hindu beliefs of the Manipuris will be described : Part II will deal with the rituals, public, domestic, agricultural, and the rites of passage. In Part III an attempt will be made to reconstruct the historical development of the religion of Manipur, showing the transition from the traditional faith to the Vaishnavism which is today the dominant religion.

## PART I : BELIEFS

### CHAPTER II

#### THE LĀIS

The pre-Hindu deities venerated by the Meitei fall broadly into three groups. The term *umang lāi* is used generally to cover all these categories of gods, although it also has a narrower meaning when applied specifically to the first of these groups. Hodson (*HERE* 402 also 1910 : 96) and Shakespear (1913 : 407) regarded the *umang lāi* as 'forest deities'. While this is possible from the actual etymology of the term (from *umang* = forest, *lāi* = god) the *umang lāi* were never regarded as limited to particular forested areas. K. B. Singh (1964 : 201) with less justification regards the term as indicating tree deities.

The *umang lāi* may be classified broadly into four groups :-

- (a) Ancestors or deities which were believed to have had a human existence at some point in the past. Examples of these are Pākhangbā, Nongpok, Ningthou, Poireiton.
- (b) Important *lāi* associated with one particular *yek*.
- (c) The domestic deities, which are the possession of particular clan or family groups. These are properly called *yumjāo lāi*.
- (d) Tutelary deities, i.e. guardian spirits connected with particular places or areas. There are various places in Manipur which are regarded as sacred. These are often hills, which are associated with a particular deity. Examples of this are Thāngjing hill in Moirāng, and Nongmaiching, which was formerly associated with Nongpok Ningthou and subsequently with Śiva.

(a) *Ancestral deities*

It would appear that there are strong grounds for regarding the first group as ancestors of the *yeks* or as tribal gods. Whether in fact these were historical persons about whom later generations wove a string of myths, and thus deified them, or whether they are to be regarded as primarily gods who are

believed to have appeared in human form is doubtful. On the whole the former possibility would seem the most likely. The wealth of detail that the Chronicles and other Manipuri writings give regarding the earthly exploits of Pākhangbā, Poireiton and Nongpok Ningthou make it difficult to regard them as anything other than founding ancestors who are later venerated and elevated in status. What does seem to be clear is that the *yeks* which eventually came to make up the Meitei society had each a set of traditions and had gods peculiarly their own. In some cases (as with Pākhangbā) these traditions are still clearly identifiable as belonging to one particular *yek*; in the other cases this identification is more difficult but may be conjectured. On the union of the *yeks* under the supremacy of the Ningthoujās these traditions became conflated; tribal gods were no longer venerated only by the tribes in which they originated, but received a more widespread veneration. A cross-fertilization of beliefs thus took place, so that what was originally tribal became the general property of all Meiteis. On this reconstruction of events we can explain not only the extraordinary multiplicity of deities but also the remnants of the peculiar tribal nature of several of them.

The clearest example of a tribal ancestral deity we have is Pākhangbā. Pākhangbā is connected explicitly with the ruling Ningthoujās. He is characterized in three different ways :

- i) as a man, the unifier of the Meiteis ;
- ii) as a deity, brother of Sanāmahi and son of Ātiyā Guru Sidaba ;
- iii) as a snake.

The human side to Pākhangbā is indicated in the *CK*. According to this account Pākhangbā arrived in Manipur during the period of the successive migrations associated with the name of Poireiton. The *NL* (9-10) expands on this with characteristic poetry :

‘Lāiren (=Sovereign) your rightful dwelling is the  
palace land ; Chief of all the lands which are good  
.....in which cattle roam, as your ancestor the great  
Sovereign came like the spreading heat of the sun, so you,

Lāiren, spread your fame from beneath the shade of the royal canopy and made the last of the ranges of Hanching Mountains your settling place.'

It appears that Poireiton was ill fitted to occupy the land as king. Pākhangbā soon obtained the throne (apparently with assistance from the Angom Ningthou). He reigned, according to the *CK*, for a period of 120 years with equity and justice, and established a strong kingdom, founding the Ningthoujā dynasty. He is also credited with assigning family names to the Ningthoujā *yek* and *yek* names to the hill tribes. He subsequently married a woman of Poireiton's group, according to some accounts Poireiton's sister, Lāisna (= *lāi* sana : possibly golden, precious, royal goddess), thus cementing the relationship between himself and his rival. Later generations called Pākhangbā Jabistha, and found for him a respectable Hindu pedigree. The *Meitei Purān* links Manipur with the Mahābhārata tradition, stating that Arjun came to Manipur and married a Manipuri princess, Chitrāngadā, the daughter of Chitrabhānu, whose genealogy is also traced back to Vishṇu. Pākhangbā-Jabistha is regarded as a descendant of this union, through Brabrubāhan.<sup>1</sup> From the Chronicles however it seems clear that Pākhangbā was thought of as an historical personality, the founding ancestor of the Ningthoujās.

There is another side to Pākhangbā's character however. The *NL* describes him in exalted terms, and both chronicles state that he was 'god by day but man by night'. A further set of traditions exhibits him as a full deity. Some of these myths seem to have been subjected to Hindu influence ; but others look as though they might have arisen in the traditional Meitei society.

The two most important of the myths make Pākhangbā the brother of Sanāmahi, and both sons of the supreme God Ātyā Guru Sidaba (=Immortal celestial guru). These myths ascribe a divine origin to Pākhangbā, as well as a divine

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1 According to some of the first generation, to other authorities of the tenth.

nature. Some sources also identify Pākhangbā and Sanāmahi with Sentreng and Kuptreng, described variously as sons of the Guru or as astral deities.<sup>2</sup> The divine aspect of Pākhangbā is also shown in that worship is afforded him by the ruling house, although with considerable secrecy.

The third aspect of Pākhangbā is as the snake. The snake symbol appears in many guises. As the coiled snake it appears on the royal flag; the same pattern called *Lāiren Mathek* is also danced out during one part of the *Lāi Harāoba*. The snake was regarded as an omen by the Meiteis. According to McCulloch (1859 : 17), when a snake of great size appeared in the presence of the king the displeasure of the god was indicated; a snake of smaller size indicated that he was pleased. McCulloch also describes the process of the snake being enticed and charmed by a *māibī*. His observations appear to refer only to the occasion of the coronation, for there is no evidence that these beliefs obtained whenever a snake appeared. McCulloch's conclusion was that 'the Raja's particular god was a species of snake called Pākhangbā, from which the royal family claims descent'. It is clear, however, as we have pointed out, that the records regard Pākhangbā as a human ancestor. Hodson (1910 : 100) seems to be nearer the mark when he speaks of Pākhangbā 'appearing to men in the form of a snake', i. e. that he incarnated himself in this form on occasions. Even this may be overstated however; in some cases—such as the flag symbol and the dance—the coiled snake was nothing more than symbolic.

Parallels to this phenomenon are frequently met with in the history of religions. Snake veneration was very widespread in the ancient world. In pre-Hindu India serpent worship has been recorded in large areas of the subcontinent (Kane 1930 : 823 ; P. N. Bose 1927 : 53-6 ; M. Neog 1951 : 150-9). In North India it is especially associated with the *nāgas*, and there

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2 It seems likely that the Guru here referred to was *Bṛihaspati*, the teacher of the gods, according to Hindu tradition, and associated with the planet Jupiter, which is commonly known as *Guru*.

is indeed a legend that the first king of Manipur was *Ananta-Nāga*, and that in this lies the origin of the royal symbol.

Who was Pākhangbā? Chatterji (1950 : 227) concludes that he may be regarded as the first great king. Later generations, it is clear, magnified him into a god, and this process was hastened by accretions of Hindu mythology. His connection with the snake is less certain. It is possible, although unlikely, that this may be a vestige of totemistic beliefs; it is perhaps more likely that it was part of the widespread *nāga* beliefs of north India. If this is the case the Ningthoujā *yek* shared in the serpent worship which was a fairly widespread phenomenon. Alternatively the snake beliefs have been incorporated into the tribal religion of the Ningthoujās, and have thus come to be associated with their tribal ancestral deity. It should be stressed that the worship of Pākhangbā remains the prerogative of the Ningthoujās. Furthermore, the worship of Pākhangbā is intimately associated with the throne: hence no member of another *yek* is allowed to worship him, and for a prince to have done so in earlier times would have implied an attempt upon the throne.

According to Hodson (1910 : 99), Pākhangbā is also known as Nongpok Ningthou (=king of the east) but this identification is doubtful. The legend of Nongpok Ningthou and of his love for Pānthoibi is described in a Manipuri book *Pānthoibi Khongul*. It is also danced out in the *Lāi Harāoba*. The legend recounts how Nongpok Ningthou, a king whose capital was at Nongmājing, met Pānthoibi as she was assisting her father at *jhuming*.<sup>3</sup> The two fell in love, though no word was exchanged between them. But Pānthoibi was married off to Khāba against her will. This presumably refers to the king of the Khāba *yek*. Subsequently she left her husband's house in search of Nongpok Ningthou. He also left his home seeking her, and the two met at Kangla. Khāba pursued his wife but could

3 A method of terrace cultivation, in which the land is first cleared by burning—the ashes being used to fertilize the ground. The word is of non-Manipuri origin.

not regain her. Nongpok Ningthou himself appears also in later legends to have been deified. According again to *Pānthoibi Khongul*, the *lāi* made Nongpok Ningthou king, garlanding him with flowers. The place where he met Pānthoibi, Kangla is now associated with the coronation of the Meitei kings. If we follow Hodson in identifying Pākhangbā with Nongpok Ningthou then Pākhangbā and his group came from the east. The reference to *jhuming* in the story of Pānthoibi seems to suggest that she dwelt in the hills.

The *NL* records that in the earliest days of the settlement of the Manipur Valley successive waves of immigrants entered Manipur. Around the time of Pākhangbā a further group entered under the leadership of Poireiton. The account of Poireiton's migration is contained both in the *NL* and in the *Poireiton Khunthok*. Poireiton appears to have led a substantial body of immigrants, and to have wandered through the hills of Manipur before entering the valley. The Chronicle speaks of his seeking a place free from death and disease.<sup>4</sup> It is evident that he failed in this quest, for the *NL* records that he himself succumbed to illness. He is frequently referred to as 'great grandfather' which seems to indicate that he was the progenitor of at least one group of the Meitei. Poireiton plays an important part in early Manipuri legend and history. He features prominently in the many aetiological legends preserved in the *NL*. He was clearly the leader of one of the Meitei *yeks*. He could scarcely have been a Ningthoujā, or an Angom, since the Angom Ningthou assisted Pākhangbā to ascend the throne. Hodson (1910 : 99) suggests that Poireiton was the deity of the Lūwāngs, and this seems quite possible.

(b) *Deities associated with a yek*

We have discussed so far those *lāi* which were regarded as having had a human existence, and who may have been progenitors of the *yeks*. There are some grounds for regarding certain other important *lāi* as tribal gods. Perhaps

4 The *NL* frequently addresses him as 'Poireiton of the foot of the hill, looking for a place free from sickness and death.'

the clearest example of this is the god Thāngjing. This god is now principally venerated by the Moirāngs. The *Lāi* Harāoba to this god has been described in detail by Shakespear (1913 : a). According to his account Thāngjing was the son of Nongshāba, the greatest of the umang *lāi*, and Sarung-laima ; he subsequently became the god of the Moirāngs.

Hodson associates Okmaren with the Khumans. According to him the Khuman *Ningthou* worshipped this *lāi* with a fast of six days (Hodson, 1910 : 110). Little is known about Okmaren, but if Hodson were correct he would be a further example of a tribal god.

It is also possible that Hodson was right in regarding Pureiromba as the deity of the Angoms. According to tradition Pureiromba was the brother of Numit Sana Khomata Ahānba, with whom he reigned alternately, day and night. The brothers were attacked by one Pongaraj Katanba, and Pureiromba fled to Nongmāijing, and later to Lamyi Yumpham. He here received the name Pureiromba ('stammerer'). Pureiromba is associated with Andro, a Loi village to the east of Imphal where a sacred fire is always kept burning. Pureiromba and Panam Ningthou are the umang *lāi* of Andro, and a *Lāi* Harāoba is held there in honour of Pureiromba (see Lightfoot 1960 : 32). It is clear that he is now the deity of this area and that he is associated with the fire which is believed to have been given at creation. There is no independent evidence to connect him with the Angoms, although there must have been some basis for Hodson's statement in this connection.

We have suggested that some of the principal umang *lāi* were in fact tribal ancestors or tribal deities. The respective deities of the five principal *yeks*—the Ningthoujās, Luwāngs, Moirāngs, Khumuls and Angoms—have been suggested. In some cases the tribal connection is fairly clear, as in the cases of Pākhangbā and Thāngjing. In the remaining cases the identification must remain speculative. The data are complicated also by the fact that the same deity may be known under several names and precise identifications are not always sure. What does seem very probable is that each of the *yeks* had a



distinct set of traditions and its own tribal god. On the union of the tribes under the Ningthoujās it is not hard to see how some cross-fertilization took place, and what were formerly tribal traditions became common property, as was the case with the amphictyonic league in ancient Israel. The single exception to this process is the Ningthoujās. The Ningthoujā tribal deity Pākhangbā was regarded as a royal possession, and his worship restricted to that *yek* alone. This was the only tradition which did not become common property, for the reason that the Ningthoujās required this cult to preserve their sovereignty over the remaining *yeks*.

(c) *Household Deities*

The third group of *lāi* are the household deities. These fall into two groups :

(a) the *Yumjāo lāi* or clan gods. Each family group (*sagei*) has a *Yumjāo lāi* which is venerated by that particular group alone. According to one Manipuri writer (L. Ibungohal Singh 1963 : 29), there are traditionally 445 such *sagei*, each of which has its own *lāi*. Although these are regarded as the ancestors or ancestresses of the *sagei* this is not to be construed as implying an ancestor worship. Examples of these *lāis* are *Soibam lāirema* of the Soibam *sagei* ; *Hijam lāirema* of the Hijam ; and so on. (For details see L. Ibungohal Singh 1963 : 29, also Shakespear 1913 ; 424). The ceremonies connected with these *sagei lāis* will be described below.

(b) secondly there are household deities which are venerated by all Meiteis. There are three of these, all of which seem to be interconnected, namely Sanāmahi, Leimaren and Phunggā. There is some doubt about the status of the last named, as we shall see. But since worship is offered at the *phunggā lāiru* and since Phunggā is closely connected with the first two mentioned in the Meitei house it seems likely that Phunggā is also to be regarded as a deity.

The most important of the household deities is Sanāmahi. Literally *Sanāmahi* means 'liquid gold'. On this basis some Manipuri writers have regarded him as a sun god. (K. B.

Singh (1964 : 203) ; W. Yumjao Singh (1966 : 66). This view seems to be influenced by a desire to find counterparts of Vedic deities in early Manipur. In fact the identification of Sanāmahi with the sun is doubtful. There is no concrete evidence in the literature to support this contention, nor are there any aspects of the worship of Sanāmahi which would suggest this. Furthermore the sun is not usually regarded as a household deity, which Sanāmahi emphatically is. It seems more plausible to regard the 'liquid gold' of Sanāmahi as fire, specifically the fire of the household hearth. There are some indications that the early Meiteis worshipped fire (see e.g. L. Ibungohal Singh 1963 : 27). The chronicles indicate that Poireiton's group carried with them a tray of earth filled with rice husks, in which a fire was kept burning (Jhalajit Singh 1965 : 35 ; also Poireiton-Khunthok). Further the hearth occupied a place of importance in the Meitei house, in the centre of the main room. Formerly it was always to be kept burning, and if it were allowed to go out it was considered a bad omen.

The importance of fire for the Meiteis is supported by the existence in the Loi village of Andro, which is situated at the foot of the Nongmāijing Hill, about five miles east of Imphal, of a fire which is believed to have been brought by the earliest settlers. This fire is regarded as sacred and is always kept burning. It is known as the *phambāl mei* (coronation fire) and formerly played an important role in the ceremonies connected with the coronation of a new king.<sup>5</sup> Sanāmahi occupies one

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<sup>5</sup> Worship of the hearth is not, of course, uncommon elsewhere. In the Graeco-Roman world fire was worshipped both as the domestic hearth and in public. Among the Greeks the hearth was also placed in the centre of the room, although the goddess of the domestic hearth Hestia was also worshipped in the prytaneum as a public act. Roman worship of Vesta could also be public. The same was the case with Ātār of the Zoroastrian system. Among the Indo-Aryans a distinction was made between the domestic hearth (*grihyāgni*) and the special hearths for the ritual *homa* offerings, which were kept in a special room. No such distinction was made among the Meiteis, nor were there anything like the elaborate ritual directions which pertained to the Vedic hearths. (See *HERE* : VI, p. 568 ff.)

of the three places of religious importance in the Meitei house, the two others being associated with Leimaren and Phunggā. The *Sanāmahi Kachin* (Sanāmahi Corner) is situated in the south west corner of the house. Here a mat and a bamboo were formerly kept for the worship of this god. (Shakespeare 1913: 444). But these objects are no longer seen in the Meitei houses.

There are few references to Sanāmahi in Manipuri literature. It is most significant that the name does not occur in the *Cheithārol Kumbābā* until the time of Garīb Niwāz, by which time Vaishṇavism had already a strong hold in the land. There are five explicit references to Sanāmahi during Garīb Niwāz's reign. Two of these refer to ritual drinking and feasting before the god. In 1766 A.D. the principal queen and her ladies are described as dressing in ceremonial clothes and drinking *yu*<sup>6</sup> in his honour (*CK*, p. 102) in the public market place; while in 1788 A.D. another king joined his queen and the royal ladies in eating fruit in the God's honour (*CK*, p.140).

The first of the references suggests that Sanāmahi could be worshipped in public. There are references also to the making of an image of Sanāmahi (*CK*, 118) and to the dedicating of an elephant to him (*CK*, 144). Another reference is to the crown Prince Ibungshi (brother of king Chingthang Khomba) building the king a house at Kānchipur; Sanāmahi was dedicated there on the same day, which supports the view that he was a household deity (*CK*, 119).

It is strange that so important a deity as Sanāmahi is not mentioned more frequently in the earlier part of the *Cheithārol Kumbābā*. It is hardly likely that he was introduced only in the reign of Garīb Niwāz as a new god; Sanāmahi is such an important deity to the Meiteis that it is impossible that he could be of only comparatively recent origin—he must have been connected with the Meiteis from the beginning. Moreover if Sanāmahi had been newly introduced at the time of

6 *Yu* is the same as *Zu* of the Naga tribes, i.e. fermented rice beer.

Garīb Niwāz the chronicles would surely contain some mention of his introduction.

Two explanations of this strange silence suggest themselves. The most likely is that since Sanāmahi was explicitly a household god he did not play any important part in the state affairs which *Cheithārol Kumbābā* largely describes. Sanāmahi was not a state god at any time and it is not until comparatively late that we read of his being worshipped publicly. Another explanation of the silence of the records regarding Sanāmahi, suggested by the editors of the *Cheithārol Kumbābā*, is that formerly he was known under different names. In this case Garīb Niwāz would not have been responsible for introducing a new god, but simply for changing the name of an older one. But it is not clear why this should have been done, and why the name Sanāmahi should have been more acceptable to the king's Vaisṇavite gurus than its predecessors.<sup>7</sup>

The editors of the *Cheithārol Kumbābā* suggest that Sanāmahi was formerly known under the names of *Tāibang Khāibā* and *Lāiwā Hāibā* (editorial footnotes to pp. 41, 52, 66). *Tāibang Khāibā* means literally 'Ruler of the Universe'. There are several references to him in the chronicles after 1685 A.D. He seems to have been connected with the palace, for in 1685 A. D. we read that when the king's palace caught fire *Tāibang Khāibā's* house was also burnt. The reference to *Tāibang Khāibā's* house suggests a separate building or shrine, rather than a corner in the dwelling such as is accorded to Sanāmahi. *Tāibang Khāibā* seems to have been specially susceptible to fire, since in 1746 A.D. again his 'kitchen' caught fire. He evidently found favour with the king, for, despite the purges of other traditional gods, the worship of *Tāibang Khāibā* was initiated by Brahmins in 1723 A.D. along with that of *Lāiyingthou Nongshābā*, *Yimthei Lāi*, and *Panthoibi* (*CK*, p. 72). The worship of all these deities is now no longer carried out, with the exception of that of *Panthoibi*, who is identified with

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7 In fact a tradition exists suggesting that Sanāmahi formerly had the name *Kuptreng* (see below).

Pārvati or Durgā, the spouse of Śiva. There does not, in fact, seem any concrete reason to identify Tāibang Khāibā with Sanāmahi.

The references to *Lāiwā Hāibā* are still more enigmatic. Like other *lāi*, he was represented in later times by an image, for the *CK* (p. 52) records that in 1700 A.D. an image of his was cast. He also shared in the degradation of the other *lāi* : in 1732 A.D. he was 'made unclean at Mongbahanba woods' (*CK*: 81). More puzzling is the reference in 1717 A.D. to a woman being escorted to *Lāiwā Hāibā* on an elephant. This may represent a marriage to the god of a kind similar to that found in Burmese popular religion. It could alternatively indicate the dedication of the woman in question to the service of the *lāi* as a sybil or oracle.<sup>8</sup> The name *Lāiwā Hāibā* means literally 'he who speaks the words of the *lāi*'. This seems clearly to indicate that the god concerned was an oracular deity. Since the giving of oracles in traditional Meitei society was the prerogative of the *māibā* and *māibi*, we may surmise that *Lāiwā Hāibā* was a deity especially associated with these functionaries. In practice, and with the obvious exceptions of the daily household *pūjā*, rituals connected with Sanāmahi are performed by the *māibā* and *māibi*. There may therefore be some justification for identifying *Lāiwā Hāibā* with Sanāmahi.

The relative silence of the records respecting Sanāmahi is more than compensated by the important place he occupies in Manipuri mythology. In two of the most important myths Sanāmahi appears as the brother of Pākhangbā and both as sons of the high god Ātiyā Guru Sidaba.

Ātiyā Guru Sidaba wanted to find out which of his sons recognized him not only as his father but also as his *guru*. So to test their knowledge he took the form of a dead cow and floated down a big river (perhaps the Imphal River or the Vijaya River, S. K. Chatterji, 1960 : 225). Sanāmahi (Kup-treng) disliked the dead cow, but Pākhangbā (Shentreng) realized that it might be the god in disguise. Sanāmahi asked

8 On the question of 'sacred marriage' to the *lāi*, see below.

how they could find whether this was so. For an answer Pākhangbā approached the dead cow and addressed it thus : 'It is not fitting for a dead cow to move its tail'. On hearing this Ātiyā Guru Sidaba thought that he had in fact moved his tail and had thus given his sons intimation of his identity. Wishing to reveal himself to the full he moved his tail. At this Sanāmahi and Pākhangbā, realizing him to be their guru, dragged the body out of the water. Ātiyā Guru Sidaba then took his proper form and said to Pākhangbā : 'You know your father the guru well and so let your name be Pākhangbā' ( *Pā*=father, *khang-bā*=to know ). From this time onwards Shentreng was called Pākhangbā. Kuptreng came to be known from this time as Sanāmahi.

The carcass of the dead cow was cut into seven pieces and divided among the founders of the Seven *Salāis*.

According to some traditions there were seven sons who were the progenitors of the seven *salāis*, of whom the two mentioned above were the eldest ( Jhulon 1947 : 6 ). This appears to be a secondary addition to an original myth, which concerned Pākhangbā and Sanāmahi only. There appears to have been a conflation of two myths—the first giving the aetiology of the name *Pākhangbā* as the one who recognized his father. To this was added a second myth, which shows some Hindu characteristics and connects the *yajña* of the cow with the naming of *salāis*, their names being derived from the portions of the cow that each received. Most of the derivations appear to be fanciful, but they have some significance nevertheless. The list is as follows :

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|--------------------|---|
| <i>Kuptreng</i>    | received the neck, which was white. Hence his <i>salāi</i> was called <i>Angom</i> ( from <i>angouba</i> =white ) |
| <i>Shentreng</i>   | received the beautiful eyes. So his <i>salāi</i> was called <i>Ningthouja</i> (from <i>ningthiba</i> =beautiful)  |
| <i>Pammaringba</i> | had the top of the head and his <i>salāi</i> was called <i>Luwāng</i> ( from <i>lu</i> =head )                    |
| <i>Leishangtao</i> | received the front legs and his <i>salāi</i> was called <i>Khuman</i> ( from <i>khumarg</i> =front legs )         |

- Konshouren* received one striped belly and his salāi was called *Moirāng* ( from *marāngbā* = stripe)
- Ashangba* received the left side of the head and so his salāi was called *Khābā* (from *kha* = left)
- Tumāngānbā* received the red heart and so his salāi was named *Ngānbā* (from *ngāngbā* = red) (Jhulon 1947 : 6 )

The second myth is concerned with the kingship. Ātiyā Guru Sidaba announced that he would appoint as king the brother who returned first after circuiting the whole world. Sanāmahi started off from the southern side of the royal compound called the Kangla.<sup>9</sup> Pākhangbā, on the advice of Leimaren, circumambulated his father's throne seven times and after that bowed to him. When he was asked by Ātiyā Guru Sidaba if he had gone round the world, Pākhangbā replied that he had gone round his father's throne on his mother's advice. This the guru regarded as equivalent to going round the world and accordingly gave the throne to him.

No sooner had Pākhangbā ascended the throne, than Sanāmahi returned to the very spot from which he had started. When he found Pākhangbā on the throne, Sanāmahi was angry and disputing his right to reign, decided to fight his brother. Pākhangbā became frightened and took refuge among many goddesses (*lairembi*). In return they promised to save him and surrounded him ; by joining hands and jumping about they ward off Sanāmahi and Pākhangbā could not be killed as he was surrounded and protected by the many *lairembi*. At this the angry Sanāmahi declared that if his brother's adviser were a man he would be killed, and if a woman he would marry her. Thus the strange matter of Sanāmahi marrying his mother Leimaren is explained.

The frustrated Sanāmahi then began to dig his toes in the earth to destroy the whole world. At this Ātiyā Guru appeared and pacified him. He promised that Sanāmahi and Pākhangbā

<sup>9</sup> The name is said to derive from *kangba* = to dry, i.e. the place where the skin of the cow dried up.

would reign twelve years alternately. Furthermore since Pākhangbā had already been crowned, Sanāmahi would reign in every household and Leimaren would stay with him.<sup>10</sup>

This joining of hands and leaping by the lāirembi was accompanied by a song. The dance is called *Ougri Hangel*, and the words which accompany it are still sung at the *Lāi* Harāoba festival.<sup>11</sup>

S. K. Chatterji has pointed out the partial Hindu parallels to both legends concerning Sanāmahi and Pākhangbā quoted above. The first myth finds its parallel in the Vedic hymn according to which the Brahman emanated from the mouth of the primeval being, the Kshatriya from his arms, the Vaiśya from his thighs and the Śūdra from his feet :

‘The Brāhman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rājanya made.

His thighs became the Vaiśya, from his feet the Śūdra was produced.’ (R. V.)

The resemblance between this Vedic poem and the legend of Ātiyā is so vague that it is probably coincidence.

The record also finds its parallel in the argument between Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya, the sons of Śiva, as to who was the greater (see S.K. Chatterji 1950 : 225f). Kārttikeya undertook to go round the world on a peacock to settle the argument while his brother Gaṇeśa circumambulated his mother Pārvātī as equivalent to going around the world.

10 There are parallels in ancient literature in which the younger brother gets the better of the older, e.g. the O.T.

Gen : Chapters 25, 27.

11 The words are as follows :

*Ke krek kek—mo mo*

He who had traversed the whole world by the short route—  
be calm be calm.

Wild cat and fowl ( ? *kamba*—an unclean animal)

Tiger and cock

His boastful crowing is irksome ; devour it.

Not so, he is the chosen cock of the *lāi*.

In a somewhat corrupted form this rhyme is now used in a children’s game. This reference to a legendary or historical incident in children’s games is not unique of course. Compare ‘Ring-o, ring-o roses’.



Both are aetiological legends. The object of the first is to explain how Pākhangbā received his name. The point of the second appears to be to explain the fact that Pākhangbā is the deity of the royal clan while Sanāmahi is the household god of all Meiteis.

There are certain elements common to both. In both myths Sanāmahi and Pākhangbā are described as brothers, sons of Ātiyā Guru Sidaba. Another common element is that Pākhangbā is regarded as having ousted Sanāmahi and obtained supremacy over him. It is possible that this reflects the victory of the Pākhangbā *yek* (the *Ningthoujas*) over a rival *yek* associated with Sanāmahi. But whether or not Sanāmahi was originally a *yek* deity, it is evident that his worship spread through the whole of the Meitei Confederacy. There is considerable evidence that the worship of Sanāmahi spread from the Meiteis to the Kukis and Tangkhuls and the Purums in the hills of Manipur. Sanāmahi is a Manipuri word and could not have originated outside Meitei speaking culture. Hodson noted (1910 : 103) that Sanāmahi was worshipped also by Lois, who offered sacrifices of pigs, dogs, ducks and fowls to him. Sanāmahi also had a place in the Lura festival of the *Tangkhuls* which takes place just before the sowing season. This festival lasts for four days and its purpose is to secure a good harvest and to give protection from disease and enemies. It is performed by the headman on behalf of the village. But on the third day heads of each household offer prayer to the domestic god Sanāmahi for the same purpose. Tarakchandra Das (1945: 195ff) has given a detailed account of the worship of Sanāmahi by the Purums. Here he is the house god, (compare Hodson 1911 : 140) and also had a particular place in one corner (Das 1945 : 49). He is worshipped to obtain health and prosperity. Fowls are sacrificed to him by being strangled by the householder while the *māipā* utters prayers and formulae. The bird is cooked and placed together with boiled rice before the god. The position of the legs of the bird at death is used to foretell the future of the sacrificer.

It is difficult to assess the degree of Hindu influence on the

remainder of the myth. Whether or not Ātiyā Guru Sidaba was part of the original Meitei mythology the evidence available does not permit us to judge. It is clear that even if the Meiteis did have a high god who was associated with the sky, as is suggested by the name Ātiyā Guru, he has been modified in name (guru) if not also in character. The status of Pākhangbā and Sanāmahi as brothers is again strange, and finds no support in the literature. There Pākhangbā was a human ancestor (although accorded certain divine attributes), while Sanāmahi was never regarded as anything other than a god. Their position as brothers is perhaps to be explained in that for the Meiteis these were the most prominent deities.

One restriction was placed upon the worship of Sanāmahi. According to Shakespear (1913 : 444) for a Rajkumar<sup>12</sup> to worship Sanāmahi (or Pākhangbā and Wāngpurel) indicated an attempt upon the throne and was dealt with accordingly. With this single exception however he is the household god of all the Meiteis.

*Leimaren* was, as we have seen, a kind of Meitei Jocaste. According to the myths she was originally the wife of Ātiyā Guru Sidaba and was subsequently married to Sanāmahi. This was a punishment to her for her partiality to Pākhangbā in advising him to walk around the Guru's throne and bow down in order to obtain the succession. Possibly her connection with Ātiyā Guru Sidaba is not original, and came about as the result of a desire to provide the high god with a spouse. There is no other evidence apart from the myth quoted above, to indicate that she was the wife of the Guru. Her worship and her place in the house explicitly connect her with Sanāmahi. It is also significant that the Khuman *Ningthou* does not worship *Leimaren* just as he does not worship Sanāmahi.

*Leimaren* has her place in the Meitei house in the centre by the north wall. Here an earthen pot, full of water with a lid, was formerly kept (Shakespear 1913 : 444). The presence

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12 Kings' sons are given the title Maharajkumar and his grandsons and great grandsons on the male line are Raj Kumars.

of water, which is one of the most essential domestic elements, is not surprising. The symbolic importance of water had its parallels both in the Vedic and Puranic literature and more widely in many other ancient cultures.

K. B. Singh (1964 : 204) has advanced the view that Leimaren was originally a war goddess. As justification for this he refers to an incident recorded in the *Cheithārol Kumbābā* (p. 9) when King Kyamba sacrificed a bull before going on an expedition against Khumbat. K. B. Singh's conclusions do not seem to be supported by the text. The *Cheithārol Kumbābā* states, 'In 1392 sak. (1480 A. D.) Sovereign Kyamba made *erātpā* of a mithan at the foot of Khāri Ching (hill) in order to obtain victory over Kabaw Kyāng.'

Three points deserve mention here. Firstly, and most important there is no mention in the text of Leimaren; the *Cheithārol Kumbābā* does not indicate to whom the mithan was offered. Secondly, the identification of Kabaw Kyāng with Khumbat is not proved. Kabaw Kyāng means literally 'Kyang of Burma', which may not necessarily have been Khumbat. Finally the word *erātpā* needs comment. The primary meaning of this word is to adore or worship. It can also mean to immolate, and it is probable although not completely certain, that this is its meaning here. The place of blood sacrifice in the Meitei ritual will be referred to again below. Here it may be noted that even if this is implied in the present context, there is nothing to indicate that it was made to Leimaren, and therefore no support here for making her a war goddess.

The worship offered to Leimaren will be dealt with in another context (below, Ch. 4). It may be said here that she is not often worshipped nowadays, even though she is primarily a household deity. She is venerated at *Tin-Lāi-thābā* during the marriage ceremonies. She is also afforded public worship on the first day of the Manipuri new year (Cheirāoba).

The third place of religious significance in the Meitei house is the *Phunggā-Lāiru*. Phungga means 'fireplace' and according to Ibungohal Singh (1963 : 27) refers to the fireplace in the centre of the main room of the house. An alternative inter-

pretation is suggested by K. B. Singh (1964 : 204), who regards the word as meaning 'Phunggā, an important lāi'. He takes *Phunggā Lāiru* thus to be the goddess of wealth, comparable to Lākshmi.

The *Phunggā Lāiru* however, was a place, rather than a person, parallel to the *Sanāmahi Kāchin*. Nor does *Phunggā Lāiru* appear as a person in the myths or the literature. It consisted of a small hole, situated to the west of the fire hearth in which there was an earthen pot. The hollow was covered with a clay roof, in the centre of which was a small hole. Through this offerings were dropped, into the pot (Shakespeare 1913 : 444). These were made especially in times of sickness. In former times a daily Pūjā was made before the hole (L. Ibungohal Singh 1963 : 28). Such was the respect felt for the *Phunggā Lāiru* that it used to be a place for the safe deposit of valuables.

(d) *Tutelary Deities.*

Certain of the Umang lāi are associated with a particular place. The most important of these are known as *Māiksi-Ngākpā*; i.e. 'guardians of the directions'. There are four of these lāi each associated with a particular geographical direction. Thāngjing, whom we have seen to be especially associated with the Moirāngs, was the guardian of the South-west, *Mārjing* of the North-east, *Wāngbaren* (or Wangpurel) of the South-east and *Koubru* of the North-west.<sup>13</sup> The authors of the Census Report of 1961 (4) regard the function of the tutelary deities as to protect the land against sickness and death entering the state from without.

We have already dealt above with Thāngjing, who clearly appears as the tribal deity of the Moirāngs, whose geographical

13 According to K. B. Singh (1965 : 201), there are seven such *lai*. He includes also *Nongpok Ningthou* of the East; *Yānggoi Ningthou* of the West, and *Chingkhei*, or *Yāitu Ningthou* of the North-east. According to this version Mārjing is guardian of the North and there is no guardian of the South. It seems more likely that there were originally four guardians only, in view of the fact that they are associated with points on the compass.

location is to the South-west of the valley of Manipur. It is not clear whether Thāngjing was originally regarded as the deity of this particular location and subsequently became the god of the people who settled in the area, or whether the name was originally that of their tribal deity. In view of the fact that certain of the other *Māikei Ngakpa*, such as Koubru, were certainly linked with a particular geographical spot, the former seems to be more likely. It is certain that in earlier times they were regarded as very important *lāi*. Shakespear (1913 : 422) notes that his informants included among the original *lāi* not only Ātiyā Guru Sīdaba, Sanāmahi and Pākhangbā, but also the tutelary gods Thāngjing, Mārjing and Koubru.

Koubru is believed to have his abode in the peak which bears his name, situated at the northern end of the Manipur valley. There are few references in the *Oheithārol Kumbābā* to Koubru, and those that do occur are extremely obscure. On a number of occasions it is stated that 'Koubru fired a gun'. One such incident occurred in 1817 A. D. :

'The first day of Shajibu (April-May) was Sunday. On that day Koubaru fired a gun. There was a *lāi Harāoba* to Koubaru. The ladies of the royal household watched the Harāoba ( *OK*, p. 209 ). 'The princes played polo against their brothers-in-law. The princes won. On that night Koubaru fired a gun' ( *OK*, p. 279 ). 'On the 10th, Sanāhal, the crown prince, had the weaning ceremony. On the 11th, Monday, *Lāi* Koubru fired the *lāi's* gun' ( *OK*, p. 315 ).

On these occasions there would appear to be little connection between the firing of the gun and the immediately surrounding events.

Hodson (1910 : 102) has suggested that the phrase refers to thunder, which was regarded as the voice of the god. Such an interpretation would not be without parallel in other religious traditions.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Compare Exodus 20 ff. where the voice of Yahweh is so regarded, and where there is also reference to fire and smoke.

In the year 1850 A.D, both Thāngjing and Koubru are described as having 'fired guns'. There followed a great flood, the bridges were broken, four settled areas were cut off by water. This incident suggests that a thunderbolt is meant.

In another place there is an obscure reference to Koubru's being 'on fire' ( *CK*, p. 38 ).

In 1643 A.D., during the reign of Khāgembā, the *CK* (p.27) gives a detailed account of the worship of Koubru together with certain other of the lāi ( not mentioned ) at the Kuchu.<sup>15</sup> This occasion marked the rebuilding of the old palace after its destruction by fire. Prodigious offerings were made to lāi beneath a canopy. These sacrifices consisted of 100 each of buffaloes, goats, sheep, cattle, geese, pigs, fowls, pigeons, dogs, fruit and ginger. It is clear that the last two could not be regarded as a blood sacrifice. The term used here is *thou-ni-bā* which means to appease or *erātpā* ( *MED*, 258). *Erātpā* can mean to immolate ( *MED*, p. 46 ). It seems almost certain that the animals listed were slaughtered. It is an indication of how little hold Hindu ideas had on the king at this time that cattle were among the offerings. On this occasion the king, Khāgembā 'asked for life'. This could mean either for his own life as king or for the protection of the people from disaster.

On a number of occasions in the *CK* Koubru is described as 'spreading a white cloth', or, 'having a white cloth spread for him'. The meaning of this curious phrase is obscure. Shakespear suggests ( 1913 : 445 ) that what is implied is the appearance of a white cloud over the peak. On the other hand the appearance of such a cloud over Koubru cannot have been so unusual that it would have warranted mention in the *CK*. Hodson's ( 1910 : 102 ) suggestion that it means snow on the mountain is scarcely more acceptable. If the passive meaning of the phrase is understood ( 'a white cloth was spread for

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15 Kuchu was situated in the South-west corner of the Kangla (the area of the old palace). It was a sacred spot and formerly had four stone pillars. Here all oaths with other *yeks* and tribes were formally sworn. Originally a court of the lāi was supposed to sit here. The lāi were replaced by ten court officials, called the *Ningthoupongba*.

Koubru' ), it is possible that a canopy might be meant beneath which offerings were made to obtain the favour of the god. It would also agree with an incident in the winter of 1843 A.D. ( CK, p. 261 ):

'The first day of the month of Wakching was a Saturday. On the 6th, Thursday, two planets were in conjunction. On the 8th, Saturday, the crown prince was wounded in the right arm with a sword, by prince Nabīn, five hours after dusk, while listening to *Bhagavat* in the temple of Śri Brindabanchandra... on Tuesday lāi Koubru spread a white cloth.'

This appears to be a ceremony of thanksgiving and prayer for the safety of the *Jubarāj* and the long life of the king. A further reference ( CK, 238 ) where Koubru is said to have a white cloth spread is found in connection with a Pākhangbā *harāoba* and the rejoicing of the people. 'King Chinglen Nongdren Khombā performed the *haraobā* of grandfather Pākhangbā, The King and the Queen with the nobles and their wives danced. On that day Koubru had the white cloth spread.' It seems reasonable to translate the phrase 'a white cloth was spread for Koubru' and to regard it as referring to the ceremonial cloths which are spread in the *lāiphām* by the *māibās* during worship.

Mārjing was associated with the North-east. Few references to him are to be found in the Chronicles. His main importance in Meitei mythology is that he is credited with the invention of polo, the national game. *Kang-jei* (polo) was believed to have been played originally by the gods, seven deities on each side. The first game took place after the land had been made habitable and the king of the land had been appointed by the gods as an expression of their rejoicing. The religious significance of polo is illustrated in that in times of calamity an offering is made to the *lāi* of polo sticks and balls. This is particularly the case where epidemics affecting domestic animals are involved ( Jhulon 1947 : 21 ).

The most important reference to Marjing in CK ( p. 25 ) occurs in 1618 A.D. during the reign of Khāgamba: The

OK records that in that year there occurred the death of an infant prince, Mayāmba. Immediately following this Mārjing was appeased by offerings of pigs, dogs, ducks, fowls, pigeons, and other creatures. He is described as having been worshipped at every watering-place of the river.

Shakespear ( 1913 : 435 ff. ) has given a detailed description of ceremonial sacrifice and divination at the shrine of Wāngbaren (called by him *Wāngpurel*). We shall return to this in more detail in our discussion of rituals below. Here it is sufficient to note that Wāngbaren had his main shrine in the south at *Shugnu*. The Moirang Ningthou played an important role in this ceremony, but according to Shakespear the *lāi* is believed to reside in the *Hanjaba* ( official ) of that place. His worship seems also to have been associated with the warding off of sickness and disaster.

(e) *The High God*

Schmidt's thesis that a kind of *ur-monotheismus* underlay man's religious concepts is based largely on evidence from Africa and other preliterate peoples. There is some evidence ( Hodson, 1911 ) that the concept of a high god was also widespread among the hill peoples of Assam. While there are some differences between the Meitei concept of Ātiyā Guru Sidaba and the usual delineation of the high god there are also similarities, in particular the idea of a supreme deity who is associated with the sky, who creates and who then withdraws himself are essentials of a typical high god pattern. While again it is true that the concept of Ātiyā Guru Sidaba seems to have undergone modification through Hindu influences he remains a fairly typical example of the remote high god ( *deus otiosus* ).

The name Ātiyā Guru Sidaba means literally 'Sky-guru-immortal.' It is not clear whether this identifies the deity with the sky itself, i. e. 'the guru, the immortal sky,' or whether the sky is to be taken as the dwelling of the deity, i. e. 'immortal celestial guru'. The ultimate differences are perhaps not great ; what is clear is that the Meitei, in common with the people of



many other cultures, associated their supreme god with the heavens (Eliade 1957, chap. 2).

What S. K. Chatterji (1950 : 225, also Jhulon 1947 : 2-3) has called a 'pre-Meitei' myth regarding creation by Ātiyā Guru Sidaba is recorded in the *Leithak Leikhārol*.

Ātiyā Guru Sidaba decided to create man. A deity called *Kodin* emanated from him. *Kodin* was asked to create a creature which by virtue of its birth would be subjected to death. *Kodin* then created seven frogs and seven apes and placed them before Ātiyā Guru Sidaba. But he was not pleased. The Ātiyā Guru Sidaba stood up and told *Kodin* to make something exactly like his shadow. *Kodin* accordingly created a new shape but he was powerless to endow it with life. Then Ātiyā Guru Sidaba gave it life. So man came into being. He let loose the frogs into water, and the apes into the hills. Man then came to live in the valley.

Then Ātiyā Guru Sidaba created the Sun (*Numit*) and the Moon (*Thā*) in the form of man. The Sun obtained the name of *Konjin-tu-thokpa* (i. e. he who emerges from the corner) and the moon *Ashiba* (i.e. death); afterwards Ātiyā Guru Sidaba vanished from the earth.

In this myth the high god creates through a demiurge, which is again a common element in the mythology of many peoples. He then withdrew from the earth, having little or no direct dealings with men, neither worshipped nor invoked. He remains however, as a kind of vague providence, guaranteeing the good order of the universe.

Another deity, *Sorāren*, later came to be identified with Ātiyā Guru Sidaba. *Sorāren* may originally have been a family god. K. B. Singh (1964 : 203) notes that he is still offered an axe,<sup>16</sup> his special weapon, by the Sorengsāngbam clan. According to Jhalajit Singh, his temple is situated at Thoubal. An

16 The association of the axe and axe-head with the sky god has its parallels elsewhere; Zeus is sometimes depicted with an axe; so also is the West African sky god Shāngo; the Nordic Thor has a hammer and Śiva has a *parasu*.

alternative account of the origin of the god is given by Shakespear (1913 : 444). According to this observer Sorāren (here called *Sorārel*) was a sky god who was worshipped in the Loi village of Phayeng, where he is claimed to be the ancestor of the villagers. A yearly offering is made here by the *māibā* of a white duck and white pigeon, which are strangled and then consumed by four men who have undergone certain ritual purifications. At Andro, whose people profess a relationship to those of Phayeng, youthful lovers appeal to Sorāren to help them gain the attentions of the girls of their choice (Shakespear 1913 : 445). Sorāren himself is said to have had an eye for beauty and a way with the ladies, so that the lovers ought not to appeal in vain. The amorous nature of Sorāren is confirmed in a legend, also recorded by Shakespear (1913 : 424), of the abduction of a maiden of the Longjam *yunnūk* by Sorāren.<sup>17</sup> A similar fate befell a girl of the Konthoujam family. Sorāren promised here that none of her kin should die, and this promise somehow came to be known to her relatives. To entice her to return to earth they killed a dog and cremated it with full rites under a sevenfold canopy. The girl was unable to detect the deception and became very distressed, fearing that some relatives had died. Sorāren tried to reassure her, but she would not be comforted and returned to earth. Before she left she was warned not to eat with the family. However she was given a meal including rice beer (*yu*) beneath the canopy, so that Sorāren would not see. But as soon as she partook of the meal Sorāren spat on it and withdrew the ladder to heaven so that she was unable to return to her husband.<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult to regard the identification of Sorāren with Ātiyā Guru Sidaba as original. Sorāren appears to have been a lesser deity of doubtful repute who, because of his association with the sky, came to be identified with the *deus otiosus*.

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17 A further legend identifies Sorāren with Nongpok Ningthou. (See the Manipuri book *Ching-goi Iruppa*.)

18 The last details are not mentioned in Shakespear. The main point of the story seems to be that *Yu* was regarded as unclean to Sorāren.

Later myths connected with Ātiyā Guru Sidaba with the seven *Lāirembis* (goddesses) and with the origin of the seven *yeks*. According to S. K. Chatterji these goddesses were married to the seven planet gods, and the offspring of these unions became the progenitors of the *yeks* (1950 : 225). The Manipuri tradition given by Jhulon (1947 : 4) elaborates this. According to this account the *Lāirembis* accompanied Ātiyā Guru Sidaba to earth. He then called the sun and the moon, who appeared together with five other *lāis* which had the heads of a buffalo, an elephant, a deer and a tiger. These *lāis* are identified with the days of the week. The short book *Āpokpā Thounirol* (a manual concerning worship to be offered to the founding ancestors) confirms the legend. The full details of these unions are as follows :

<i>Lāirembi</i>	<i>Planet</i>	<i>lāi-day</i>	<i>offspring yek ancestor</i>	<i>yek</i>
Lāiremba (Mohonnu) or Lāiribi	Moon	Nonglun Thā the moon, Sunday	Kuptreng Sanāmahi	Angom
Leirong Leirongbi	Sun	Numit the sun Monday	Shentreng	Ningthouja
Thoinu	Mars	Buffalo- headed lāi Lei-pāk-pok pa Tuesday	Pāmmarigba	Luwāng
Tonthān- gnu	Mercury	Yumshakeisa elephant-headed lāi Wednesday	Leishāngtāo	Khuman
Chenu- leima	Jupiter	Sagonsen Deer-headed lāi Thursday	Konsouren	Moirāng

Tharo- longbi	Venus	Irāi Tiger-headed lāi Friday	Ashangba	Khābā
Khamji- knu	Saturn	Thāngja Tiger-headed lāi Saturday	Tumangba	Ngānba

This legend has become conflated with that mentioned above, according to which the *yeks* were apportioned a part of the dead cow, which was the body of the Ātiyā Guru Sidada. There are several versions as to which part refers to each *yek*, and there is no unanimity. One account apports the right eye, left eye, right and left ears, right and left nostrils, and the teeth; Hodson (1910 : 100) had two versions which differed considerably. Perhaps the oldest version is that given by Jhulon. In this the parts were divided as follows :

Angom	the white neck
Ningthoujā	the eye
Luwāng	the head
Kluman	the front legs
Moirāng	striped sections of the belly
Kāhbā	the face
Ngānba	the breast

Chatterji (1950 : 225) notes that the *yeks* subsequently came to be identified with the Brahmanical gotras thus :

Angom	=	Bhāradvāja, or Kauśika gotra
Ningthoujā	=	Śāndilya
Luwāng	=	Kāśyapa
Khuman	=	Maudgalya (corrupted to Madhu-kulya)
Khābāngāngba	=	Naimiṣya or Bhāradvāja
Moirāng	=	Ātreya
Chenglei	=	Bhāradvāja

19 Shakespeare gives alternative names for the Lāirembis who became the ancestresses of the *yeks*: the days of the week are regarded as their respective birthdays (1913 : 445).

Several features stand out regarding these myths. In the first place, it is evident that Pākhangbā and Sanāmahi have been incorporated into a mythology which did not originally concern them. Under the guise of the sun and the moon they have been given a place in the mythical origin of the *yeks*. Secondly, the allusion to the animal headed spouses of the *lāirembis* is curious. The elephant headed one looks at first sight like an allusion to Ganeśa ; but since the others cannot be identified with Hindu deities this idea must be rejected. It would be attractive to see here an allusion to an early form of totemism which regarded the original ancestors of the *yeks* as the animals concerned. There is, however, no evidence elsewhere in Meitei society which would lend support to this view and it therefore seems unlikely. It is not easy at the moment to explain the presence of these animals in Meitei cosmology. A further problem concerns the identification of these creatures with the days of the week. There does not appear to be any clear parallel to this, unless it be that certain gods were worshipped on certain days. There is some evidence that this was the case. The Ningthoujās, for example; according to Hodson (1910 : 109), worshipped Pākhangbā on Monday,

The present elaboration of these myths, which are intended to explain the origins and inter-connections of the seven *yeks*, is unlikely to have arisen until the time when the Meitei Confederacy was established. This was about the sixteenth century. On the other hand they must have arisen before the *Khābā* and *Ngānba yeks* combined into one, and the *Ohenglei yek* was incorporated to make up the number seven. There is no clear evidence when this happened, although the evidence points to the disappearance of the *Khābā* and *Ngānba yeks* as separate entities during the Burmese devastations. If these suggestions are correct it points to the elaboration of the myths during the period when Vaishnavism was gaining the ascendancy. This in itself is not without significance.

## PART II : RITUALS

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PUBLIC FESTIVALS

The public festivals in Manipur fall into two broad groups : those of Hindu origin, and those traditionally Meitei. These divisions are not absolute, for there is evidence of Hindu influence on the Meitei festivals, and traditional customs have been incorporated into the Hindu festivals. In this chapter the Hindu festivals will be discussed only briefly, paying special attention to the peculiarities of their observance in Manipur which are not found elsewhere in India. Secondly, the festivals of Meitei origin will be examined, and special attention will be given to the important *Lāi Harāoba*.

##### (a) *The Hindu Festivals*

There are seven main festivals which were introduced into Manipur under the influence of Hinduism. Three of these are in one way or another connected with Kṛṣṇa : *Holi*, which basically commemorates the youthful frolics of the god, *Kṛṣṇa Janma (Janmāstāmi)*, which celebrates his birth, and *Rath Jātrā*, which honours him in the form of Jagannātha. Of the remaining festivals *Baruni* (the North Indian Ganga Septamī) is dedicated to Śiva, while *Durgā Pūjā* is one of the *Navarātri* festivals. Although *Sarasvatī Pūjā* should also properly fall during the *Navarātri* period (September-October) Manipur follows the popular usage in worshipping Sarasvatī during Śri-pañchami (January-February). The remaining festival is *Divālī*.

*Divālī* is kept in Manipur, as in the rest of India, in October-November (the month of Mera), and follows the usual Hindu pattern. While the festival is in honour of Lakshmi the legend current in Manipur to justify this is unusual. see Census 1961 : pp. 21 ff.). *Divālī* is pre-eminently in Manipur a festival of rejoicing. Not only are the usual lights and candles and earthen lamps in evidence, but coloured paper and flowers are

also used to decorate the houses and firework displays are held. *Pūjā* is offered within the house to Lakshmī, goddess of wealth, of fruit, flowers, areca nut, betel, vermilion and sacred basil. These, together with the usual *dakshina*, are laid out on plantain leaves. Bathing, the wearing of clean clothes and the fresh marking of the *tilak* are necessary. There is little evidence in the Manipuri observances of the fertility origins of the festivals. The playing of dice is also common in Manipur. This originally involved throwing of dice to determine the fortunes of the coming year, but has now degenerated into gambling for money and often continues long after the festival itself has ended.

*Sarasvatī Pūā* is enthusiastically celebrated in Manipur, as elsewhere in India, by the student community. Money is collected for the construction of images of Sarasvatī, and these are installed in small huts at the various places of learning. Often a second hut is also constructed to house the food and other offerings. The images are garlanded with flowers and carried in procession on palanquins. Songs in honour of the goddess are sung and slogans shouted. On arrival at the colleges the images are installed on a platform. According to custom this must face South or East and be covered with a red sheet, on top of which is a smaller white one. The Brahmins conducting the *pūjā* then set out the prescribed offerings. These include flour (spread out in the shape of a star) and rice, as well as fruits and spices. The central item is an earthen pot, half filled with water and containing betel nut, betel leaf and money. A larger pot is filled with rice and a hand of bananas is placed on it. Incense is offered while the Brahmins recite sacred texts. Food which has been prepared by the Brahmins is distributed to the company. This usually consists of sweets, *puri* and *khechri*.<sup>1</sup> The following day the images are immersed.

The *Krishnaite* festivals seem to be of fairly recent origin. In the case of *Rath Jātrā*, which is locally known as *Kang*, it is

<sup>1</sup> Rice and *dak* coloured with tumeric.

fairly certain that the festival was introduced during the reign of Gambīr Singh (A. D. 1825-34). *Kang* closely follows the pattern of the Puri festival, and is held at the second new moon of *Inṇa* (June-July) until the tenth day. There is some evidence of the worship of Jangannāth during the second half of the eighteenth century, and today many Manipuri temples contain images of this deity. Since the worship of Kṛishṇa under the form of Jagannāth is widely popular in Bengal we may assume that the deity entered the Manipuri pantheon from Orissa via Bengal. The cart (*kang*) is constructed either out of the public contributions or from the donations of wealthy men in the locality. It is four-wheeled and large enough to bear the idol and four attendants. The cart is suitably decorated with paintings of gods and covered with a canopy; it is often more than twenty feet in height. The images of Kṛishṇa, Balarām and sometimes also Subhadrā are dressed and placed on the cart. They are normally attended by two Brahmins and two Manipuri girls equipped with fans. The worshippers themselves draw the cart and offer *barti*, flowers and fruits whenever the cart halts. *Barti*<sup>2</sup> is a popular offering, which is thought especially acceptable to the deities. The offerings are performed to chanting and the music of the *pung* (Manipuri drum), *jhāl* (large cymbals), gongs, bells and the conch. The food is distributed among the householders present. The *barti* is partially burnt and then used to mark the foreheads of the worshippers; it is then put in the doors of the houses as a prophylactic against evil spirits. During the evening of the festival communal feasting takes place in the *mandaps*. Also a kind of *kīrtan*, known as *khubak iseī*, is performed. This consists in the dramatic singing and dancing of certain episodes from the life of Kṛishṇa. There is some evidence that the final day of the festival was the occasion, in former times, for the throwing of mud, water and other missiles, such as is found in other parts of India during *Holī*. However this is now no longer the case.

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2 *Barti* consists of cotton fibre wrapped around short sticks and soaked in ghee.



The festival of Kṛishṇa's birth, *Janmāshṭamī*, is celebrated in Manipur on the eighth day of the new moon in the month of *Thāwan* (July-August).<sup>3</sup> The legend of the birth and deliverance of the child Kṛishṇa from the hands of King Kaṃsa of Mathurā is accepted in Manipur, and celebrated during the festival. *Krishna Janma* is one of the most popular festivals and is widely observed. The twenty-four hours immediately before midnight—the time of Kṛishṇa's birth—are usually kept with fasting, which is broken only in the early hours of the morning. At this hour the temples are usually crowded to hear the Brahmins reciting the stories of the birth and life of the god. A peculiarity of the keeping of the festival in Manipur is the part played by children. It is a time of the giving of presents and the playing of games, a sort of Hindu Christmas. Traditional Meitei pastimes such as *yubi lakpi*<sup>4</sup> and *likol sanaba*<sup>5</sup> are played at this time.

The third, and most important, of the Kṛishṇaite festivals is *Holī*, or to give it its Manipuri name, *Yāosang*. This is the greatest of the Manipuri festivals and is celebrated on the full moon of *Lamda* (February-March), lasting for six days. Aside from the usual Puranic stories about the origins of *Holī*, the Manipuri festival is closely connected with the coming of spring. Manipuri piety has however given *Yāosang* yet a further significance. Caitanya, the founder of that particular form of Vaishṇavism which predominates in Manipur, is thought to have been born at the time of *Holī*.<sup>6</sup> Caitanya is regarded as an incarnation of Kṛishṇa and is therefore worshipped as a god. Popular piety has attributed to him the same kind of

3 It is elsewhere celebrated on the eighth day of the second fortnight in the month of Bhādrapada (August-September). The earlier Manipuri date still preserves the significance of the name *ashtami* (i.e. eighth day) although Manipuris usually call it *Kṛishṇa Janma*.

4. Literally 'snatching the coconut': each player tries to snatch a greased coconut from the other and to run to the goal with it—a kind of local rugby.

5 A game played with cowrie shells.

6 His birthday is thought to have been 4th February, 1486.

youthful frolics which characterize the youth of Kṛishṇa himself, and these too are remembered at the festival.

Preparation for Yāosang begins well in advance. On the night before the actual festival bonfires are made, and in the early morning young males abuse each other with obscene words.<sup>7</sup> Both of these aspects are common in the Hindu celebrations elsewhere in India although the exchange of abuse may have a traditional counterpart. The young men construct bamboo huts which are placed by the sides of the road. These are called *Yāosang*, and give the Meitei name to the festival. At dusk an image of Caitanya is placed in these huts by a Brahmin. *Pūjā* is offered to these images, and a *kīrtan* and the recital of sacred texts takes place. The image is then removed and the hut set alight. While it is burning shouts of 'Hari bola' and 'He Hari' are exchanged. The burnt embers are taken and used to place a mark on the foreheads of the worshippers. They are then placed in the door posts as an apotropaic charm.<sup>8</sup> The burning of the *yāosang* is the signal for children, especially the girls, to begin collecting small gifts of money from houses and from passers-by. The boys also collect rice and vegetables for the final feast. The traditional *Holi* custom of spraying coloured water and smearing coloured powder is also indulged in.

The two communal aspects of the festival are the dancing and the procession. An ancient folk-dance, known as *thābal chongba* ("dancing by moonlight") is performed. Today this dance takes place in the afternoon as well as after sunset. Both sexes take part, and the dancers join hands in an ever-increasing circle as more and more participants join in. The singer stands in the centre, often with musicians, and sometimes a western-style band. The songs describe the creation, famous

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7 This practice is fairly widespread in connection with fertility festivals. In Manipur it is called *nonglāoba*, and as Shakespear points out was also traditionally used in connection with the exchanges between Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi (Shakespear 1913 : 433). It is now becoming less common and arouses social disapproval.

8 Compare the use of *barti* at Rath Jatra.

legendary exploits and love stories. Each phrase is first sung by the leader and then repeated by the dancers. The dancing continues until the early hours of the morning.

The procession is known as *halānka*, and usually numbers several thousands. It is led by an image of Viṣṇu, mounted on a white horse, and each *kīrtan* party in the procession has its own distinctive mark, usually the colour of the head-dress and a flag. On arrival at the open ground near the temple of Govindajī the various *kīrtan* parties perform song and dance dramas of the life of Kṛṣṇa.

It will be noted thāt the Manipuri observance of *Holī* differs slightly from the normal Hindu pattern. While the basic Hindu features of the festival are present the Meiteis have given it the added significance of its being a commemoration of Caitanya's birth. Traditional and very ancient customs have been incorporated. It is likely that the *thābal chongba* dance was originally connected with the coming of Spring, and that the burning of the hut (*yāosang*) may have symbolized the destruction of the cold (L. Ibungohal Singh, 1963 : 113-4). There is some similarity between the *thābal chongba* and the *ke-kre-kre*, (p, 24. f.n. II) although the figures of Pākhangbā and Senamahī, who are within and outside the circle of dancers respectively in the latter dance, are absent in *thābal chongba*. What is evident is that into the Hindu festival certain traditional Meitei aspects have been incorporated. The combination of these diverse elements—the Kṛṣṇaite Hindu, the Caitanyaite, and the traditional Meitei—help to account for the very wide popularity of the festival.

A further group consists of the two Śiva-Durgā festivals. *Baruṇī* rivals *Ilolī* in popularity, and is probably the celebration which attracts the most crowds. It takes place on the thirteenth day of the dark half of *Phairen* (January-February). As elsewhere in north-east India *Baruṇī* is devoted to the worship of Śiva, and is associated with the taking of a ritual bath. As with *Yāosang* there is some evidence that traditional elements have been incorporated into the festival. In its present form however *Baruṇī* is of relatively late date. It was

almost certainly introduced by Chandrakirti during the nineteenth century. The shrine of Śiva at which worship is offered was constructed on the order of this king by one Yumnam Keirungba.

The main feature of *Baruñi* is the worship of the phallic aspect of Śiva. The place of pilgrimage is Nongmaijing mountain, some six miles to the east of Imphal, and the phallic stone itself is to be found in a flat place just below the summit. The mountain is climbed during the night by the northward route and descended the following day on the opposite side. The pilgrims usually pause to worship and offer *dakshinā* at the shrine before making the descent. The customary rite of bathing in the Ganges is fulfilled by dipping in the Chinggoi<sup>9</sup> stream prior to climbing the mountain.

While the festival itself (and probably Śaivism as a whole) is of fairly late introduction into Manipur, it does embrace certain earlier traditional rites. The bathing in the Chinggoi is certainly pre-Hindu, and both this and the sacredness of the Nongmaijing mountain have a significant association with the divine couple Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. The exact cultic significance of the hill is obscure, although it seems likely that, as part of the process of Hinduism the Śiva shrine was built with the object of transferring worship from the Meitei *lāi* to Śiva and Durgā, or of identifying the two pairs of deities.

Like *Baruñi*, *Durgā-pūjā* is also a Hindu festival into which traditional material has been incorporated. It is the Autumn festival and is celebrated for ten days during the first part of Mera (October). Certain restrictions are laid upon the worshippers during the period of the festival: the cutting of hair and nails is forbidden, and married daughters are not allowed to enter the houses of their parents. The main feature of the ceremonial is the supplicatory prayers offered to the goddess. Worship takes place in *mandaps*, which are specially erected

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9 Associated in an ancient lyric with the deaths of a younger daughter of Nongpok Ningthou and her lover, the son of Koubru.

and decorated. As in the Kṛishṇaite festivals Brahmīns relate the stories of the Purānas and *nagarkirtāns*, depicting the lives of Kṛishṇa, Rādhā and Caitanya are performed. The animal sacrifices, which form a basic part of the worship of Durgā elsewhere, are carried out only by non-Manipuri members of the armed forces stationed in Imphal, on the eighth day of the festival. It is possible that the gourd, which is ceremonially sliced open by the stroke of a sword, was originally an animal sacrifice.

The final day of Durgā-pūjā incorporates *Kwak Jātra*. The origin of this is obscure, although Shakespear (1910 : 81) perhaps preserves the earlier form of the aetiological legend. According to this Pākhangbā had a son, Khui, who rebelled against him and for a time seized the throne. Eventually Pākhangbā defeated his rebellious son in a single combat, and decapitated him. His spirit thereupon entered the rare *wākāmbong* (yellow bittern) bird. In commemoration of this event the practice was instituted. A flock of the birds were frightened and then the king's marksmen demonstrated their skill by shooting at them with arrows. In 1726-7 Garīb Niwāz substituted the common crow for the rare *wākāmbong*, and instead of simply killing the birds the direction of its flight was read as an omen, determining whether the following year will bring good or evil fortune to the king. As celebrated at present crows are enticed to a certain spot with food, and then frightened by the sound of a gunshot. The direction taken by the first bird indicates the run of fortune : northerly directions are generally propitious, southerly directions portend evil.<sup>10</sup> This traditional incident has come to be fused with the Hindu story of the rescue of Sītā by Rām from the demon king Rāvaṇa. An effigy of Rāvaṇa is made and shot at. The place where the shots strike the image are again read as omens.<sup>11</sup>

10 There is probably some influence here of the Hindu idea that the South is the zone of Yama, the god of the dead, and of demons.

11 In Shakespear's account (1910 : 81) ten poles (probably representing Rāvaṇa in his ten-headed aspect) were erected with pots on them ; one

From the above it will be seen that the Hindu festivals have not been accepted into Manipur without modification. While the basic content of these festivals has been preserved, they have also been enriched and modified by indigenous elements, rites and customs. The result is that they are peculiarly Meitei Hindu festivals. This influence however has been mutual rather than one-sided ; Meitei festivals have been influenced by Hindu practices as much as the reverse, and it is to these that we now turn.<sup>12</sup>

(b) *The Meitei Festivals*

There are three festivals in this class : *Cheirāoba*, *Heikru Hitongba* and *Lāi Harāoba*. The first two of these have each been influenced by Vaishṇavism and today include some Hindu elements, especially in the introduction of the worship of Śiva and Govinda respectively. In *Lāi Harāoba* the traditional Meitei religion has been most fully preserved, and it is this ritual which, more than any other, throws light on the early religion of Manipur. The *Lāi Harāoba* therefore will be given more extended treatment.

*Heikru Hitongba*<sup>13</sup> is the name given to the boat-race festival. The origin of this festival is not fully known, although it is certain that it is very ancient. The earliest reference to it in the Chronicles occurs in 1508 A.D. although

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was larger than the rest and was dressed in a robe. These were then fired at police marks men. If a hit were made in the areas representing the heart, cheek, throat, chin or forehead, good fortune was indicated.

12 We may mention here *Ningol Chakkouba*, although it is a domestic celebration rather than a religious festival. It corresponds to the *Bhrātrī-dvitiya* of elsewhere in eastern India, and is basically a family reunion. The Manipuri celebration is rather different from that of the rest of India, where it involves a woman's inviting her brothers to dine with her. In Manipur the roles are reversed and the brother becomes the host. The system was begun by Chandrakīrti, whose sister married a commoner and was therefore unable to entertain her royal brother.

13 *Heikru* is a small edible fruit (*emblica officialis*) : one of the *hitongba* (crew leaders) wears a necklace of this fruit, which determines also the position of the boat on the canal ; it cannot be eaten until after the race.

it is quite possible that it goes back even earlier than this date. References to *Heikru Hitongba* occur with great frequency after that date in the *CK*. Its present Hindu form is said to date from the time of Bhāgyachandra, and in view of the numerous religious reforms and innovations brought about by this king this seems quite likely. Since the temple in which the offerings are presented is known to have been built in A.D. 1776, that is during Bhāgyachandra's reign, this supposition is strengthened.

The festival takes place annually on the 11th Langban on the canal by the Bijoy Govinda area of Imphal. The leaders of the two crews (the *hitongba*) make offerings to the god consisting of pieces of silver and gold before the race. The images of Govinda and Rāseśvārī are installed upon a raft and various offerings are made to them by Brahmins and again by the *hitongba*. The Vishṇu image is then brought out from the palace and installed in a prominent place. Two crews compete, but there is no fixed number of oarsmen as long as both crews have the same number. The most important members of the crews are the two front rowers (the *nourungba*) and the two rear rowers (*noumong*): the coxswain is called the *hināosāba*. The crew leader is accompanied by a personal bodyguard (*chang*). All means are permitted to the competitors, including attempting to overthrow the other boat.

The religious significance of Heikru Hitongba is very obscure and can only be guessed at. We may suppose that in its pre-Hinduized form the competition, now conducted before Govinda and Vishṇu, was originally carried out before a *lāi*, but what the deeper religious significance of this was is altogether difficult to appreciate.

*Cheirāoba* is the New Year's festival, which takes place in Manipur on the first day of the month *Sajibu* (March). The name *cheirāoba* means literally 'to announce by means of a stick'.<sup>14</sup> In earlier times it was the custom for the year to be

14. There is no basis for Hodson's view (1910: 106) that the name is connected with salt. *Chi* is not Manipuri word.

proclaimed by the heads of the four *panas*, who each wore the distinctive colours of their own *pana*. They rode on horseback and carried bells attached to the top of sticks. The festival hence received name *cheirāoba*, 'announcing by the stick'.<sup>15</sup>

During the reign of Kyāmba in the second half of the fifteenth century the ceremonial was altered. One man replaced the four *pana* heads. He became known as the *cheithāba*,<sup>16</sup> and that particular year came to be named after

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15 The symbolism of the stick and its various meanings for the Manipuris are very well illustrated in the account preserved by Higgins of the *cheithāba* for the year 1926 :

'Let all the evils such as war and battle, enmity and struggles, fall down at the advent of the new year in which the seasons of the ancient god Pakhangba, who is the head of gods, fallen from the sky at a happy place, and the god Chingshomba the white, who reigns in the north east, are invested with the ceremony of heeithaba, in which the Cheithaba man performs it with a stick on his shoulder—the stick which exempts the Cheithaba man from the burden of public work when he is seen to carry it on his shoulder on the public road—the stick which can make one conquer great and small kingdoms in battle, the stick which is attached to the bamboo tube in the time of coronation at Kangla, the stick which is used by warlike young men in fight, the stick which was the hilt of the sword of the god Thangjing, the stick of which the head is known at the first touch, the stick that opens the door of the earth and fills up the underground pit in the month of Sajibu, in the reigns of all kings according to ancient custom' (quoted in Higgins, n.d., 50).

The last phrase is a reference to the *Cheirāoba* rituals of *Kongba Leikhong Phatpa* and *Shajibu Leikhun Phunba*.

16 The exact meaning of *cheithāba* is not clear. If we take it as a corruption of *chahi* (=year) and *tāba* (=fall or count) we have the meaning 'he upon whom the evils for the year fall' 'he by whom the year is counted'. Both make good sense, but in view of the fact that the form *chei* is also contained in the name *cheirāoba*, it seems unnecessary to regard it as a corruption of *chahi*. If we preserve the basic meaning of *chei* we are left with either 'he who leaves the stick' (*thāba*=to leave), or, more reasonably, 'he upon whom the stick falls' (*tāba*=to fall). The latter would make good sense in view of Higgins' observation (15 above), that the *cheithāba* carried the stick on his shoulder as an indication of his exemption from work.



him.<sup>17</sup> This name was also given to the oracle for the year, which was determined by the astrologers and which contained prognostications of events of state importance.

The *cheithāba* has to be a Meitei : Brahmins, Loi and non-Hindus cannot hold the office. He is selected by a process of comparing his individual horoscope with that of the king, and his basic function is to avert disaster or harm from falling upon the king and nation.

The installation of the *cheithāba* takes place on the eve of the new year (the last day of the month *Lamda*) before the king. The *cheithāba* for the previous year sits on the king's right and the incoming *cheithāba* on his left. During the ceremonial both use the old Meitei language. The two *cheithābas* change places, and then the outgoing *cheithāba* addresses the king as follows :

'King Lainingthou, the coming year is my friend's year (name). Let the king and queen live long ; let it be more prosperous than the past year in the production of rice, fish, other foods, and salt ; and let it be richer in everything,'

The new *cheithāba* then kneels before the king with folded hands and says †

'Lainingthou ; from today I bear on my head all thy sins, diseases and misfortunes, shame, mischief, all that is aimed in battle against thee, all that threatens thee, all that is bad and hurtful for thee and thy kingdom.'<sup>18</sup>

In previous times any national calamity was thought to be the responsibility of the *cheithāba*, and he was punished accordingly. Hodson (1901 : 32) records that in 1898 a deputation approached the Political Agent with the request that the *cheithāba* for that year be punished, since there was a severe

<sup>17</sup> Thus the CK not only dates the year according to the saka era, but also in every case after Kyāmba's time, names the *cheithāba* for the year.

<sup>18</sup> In the speech of the incoming *cheithāba* I have followed the wording given by Hodson (1901 : 105-6), with which my field notes substantially agree. Higgins (n. d., 50) gives a much fuller account for the year 1926, some of which has been quoted in 15 above.

cholera epidemic, for which he was considered responsible. On the other hand the *cheithāba* did have certain privileges. He was exempted from the forced labour demands (the *labup*), and also received gifts and a *pāri* ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  acres) of land rent free for life. The restrictions which were placed upon him because of his office involved abstention from fishing, cultivation and carrying out his trade ; further, he was not allowed to use a cutting tool, for fear that he might lose blood and thereby bring calamity upon the nation as a whole. One of his main ritual functions was to make offerings on behalf of the king to the traditional *lāi* and to the Hindu gods.

Higgins (n. d., 34) has preserved an interesting account of an actual oracle reading which constituted the *chahitaba* predictions for the year.<sup>19</sup> This took place in the *mandap* of Govindāji in the middle of April. After singing and reading of Sanskrit books the Brahmins explained the texts in Manipuri. A lamp was kept burning before the god, and betel nut and large discs of salt (*thumpāk*) were offered to him. *Pān* was then distributed. The astrologers then took a cloth and began reading the divisions of time, and foretold the fortunes of the coming year. The outgoing and incoming *cheithābas* then embraced and bowed before the king.

Today preparations for Cheirāoba include a thorough cleansing of the house, in which old utensils are thrown away and new ones take their place.<sup>20</sup> Those which cannot be replaced are well washed. The houses and gardens are also well decorated and cleaned. The removal of the defilement of the past year is thus ensured.

A curious rite, supposed to involve the prediction of who is to die in the coming year, is carried out by certain *māibās*. This takes place on the eve of *Cheirāoba* (i.e., the last day of the old year) at Heibokching Grove. Here the *māibās* perform a

19 The actual *Cheithāba* for the year, couched in symbolical and apocalyptic language is preserved by Higgins in the form of a transcript from the palace authorities (Higgins, n.d., 46-51).

20 Such cleansing ceremonies are found to have parallels in other religions : perhaps the Jewish passover is the most obvious.

ceremony of *thouniba* (appeasement) to the *lāi*, which is called by the name *shing-shatpa*, meaning 'the pulling out of the sticks.' On the first Saturday of the last month of the year (Lamda) it is believed that the *lāi* gather and represent the persons who are going to die that year, each with a small stick. Here the *māibās* come and beg the *lāi* to spare those designated by the sticks. The *thounibā* calls for certain offerings, which consist of a complete set of garments intended for the *laining-thou* and *lairema*, seven bamboo barrels of *kabok* (puffed rice), milk, an earthen pot of molasses, a piece of cloth which must have a join in it, some iron and gold, and seven candles made of beeswax. In addition certain food offerings are required: flour, seven different kinds of fruit, the same number of different flowers and various offerings of vegetables and rice. These are all offered to the *lāi* and become the property of the *māibās*. The appeasement rites having been completed, the *māibās* can then remove from the sticks those representing people whose lives have been reprieved. These sticks, each of which is about a palm in length, are removed and tied together with a coin by a hand-woven string. Both articles are then wrapped in a new cloth and handed to the individuals whose lives they represent, as evidence that they will not die that year.

The *māibās* are also involved in another ceremony, this time conducted at the shrine of *Thong-ngāk Lairembi*, a goddess associated with the departed.<sup>21</sup> The palace *māibās* here make offerings of gourds, from which the dead are supposed to drink, and offer to the *lairembi* gifts of clothes. Fires are also lit by the *māibās*, who divine the fortunes of the king and land according to the kind of insects which are drawn into the flames.

On the seventh day after *Cheirāoba* another ceremony of prognostication is carried out by the palace *māibās*. This takes place at two *lāiphams* between the *Iril River* and the village of *Kongba*, east of *Imphal*. The *lāiphams*, both of which face south, belong to the *Angōm pokpa* and the

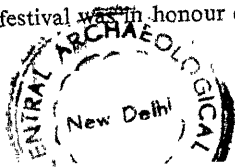
21 On the fate of the dead see ch. 5 (c).

Ningthem *pokpa*. *Thouniba* is performed, and the offerings consist of gold and silver and a raw fish known as *sareng*.<sup>22</sup> The divination takes the form of the digging up of the earth at a certain spot and examining it for signs. The contents of the earth—the insects and so on—are wrapped in a cloth, which is then carried by the *māibā* around his neck to the shrine of the *Yumjāo Lāi* in the palace. Here it is deposited and opened five days later, when the signs are read and predictions concerning the king and affairs of state for the coming year are made. The hole by the *lāiphams*, from which the earth was taken, is filled in again. The rituals are given the names *Kōngba Leithong Phatpa* ('digging the hole at Kongba') and *Sajibu Leikhun Phunba* ('closing up the hole in Sajibu'.)

Special worship of the domestic deities Sanamahi and Leimaren is carried out during Cheirāoba.<sup>23</sup> Seasonal fruits and flowers are offered to these *lāi* and the earthen pots which are placed at their sacred spots in the house are cleansed. Other important *lāi* such as Nongsaba and Pākhangbā also receive offerings at this time. A further rite is carried out at the gate of the *inkhōl* (compound) of each house. Here three portions of rice, together with certain side dishes, are set out. These are said to be for the *cheithāba* of the past year, the *cheithāba* of the present year, and that of the coming year. The *lāi* who are thought to partake of these offerings are given the names Irammaba Tumaba ('He who is the lord of my land'), Kumsānā Kumlikla ('one who is chief for the year'), and Iram Shenba Tushenba ('He who is the guardian of my land'). Nothing further is known of these *lāi*, who are only worshipped at this particular time. Various apotropaic rites are also carried out by the women of the house.

22 *Wallago attu*. The offering is called *shāren chanba*, which means 'to offer a living creature': it is possible that we have here a relic of animal sacrifice.

23 This is presumably why Hodson's non-Manipuri informant thought that the festival was in honour of Sanemahi (Hodson 1910 : 104).



During the morning of *Cheirāoba* the elderly ladies of the household collect from other houses in the neighbourhood rice and vegetables, which are then offered at a junction where three roads meet, to the *shāroingāroi*.<sup>24</sup> The eldest female of the house also places cooked food at the four corners of the compound to ensure that no evil enters in during the coming year. The household rites at *Cheirāoba* then, taken as a whole, are both protective and positive: they not only ensure that the domestic deities are propitious but also guard the household against evil influences from without.

The *usin* divination is carried out both in private by the households, and in a more public way by the *māibās*. Fish are set loose in the pond, each one representing a particular person of the house. A particular type of fish (*ngāmu*, *Ociocephalus harcourtbutleri*) must be used. By the movements of the fish it is known whether the coming year will be prosperous or not for the person represented: if the fish swims straight, good fortune will come, but if it does not then misfortune may be anticipated. When this is carried out by *Māibās* the fish represents the king, and the ceremony is followed by the offering of a pot filled to the brim with water, flowers, fruit, betel nut and a small amount of money. The purpose of this offering to the *lāi* is to secure the prosperity of all the people.

*Cheirāoba* traditionally concludes with a family feast, followed by climbing of hills by all the people. *Cheirāoching* is an especially popular hill for this purpose, and it has a small shrine of Śiva on its summit. It is not clear whether this custom of hill-climbing is an original part of the festival. There are no references to it in the earlier Manipuri sources,

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24 This ceremony is called *Sāroi Khangba*. *Sāroi-ngāroi* means literally 'beast and fish creatures', and is used of spirits which are evilly disposed to men. Presumably they were originally thought of as having animal shapes, although there is little evidence that they are so conceived now. Higgins (n.d. 11) gives the origin of these beings as the offspring of Guru Sidaba and Leimaren. They demand food from mortals and are perpetually hungry.

and it is possible that it has been introduced, under the influence of Barunī, in the interests of Śaivism.

(c) *The Lāi Harāoba*<sup>25</sup>

The *Lāi Harāoba* is perhaps the most authentically Meitei of all the traditional festivals, and the one which most closely preserves the ancient Manipuri culture. As one Manipuri writer has put it :

'The *Lāi Harāoba* mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strength and weaknesses, the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their intensest.' (E. Nilakanta Singh, 1961 : 30).

It is a complicated festival, and may be performed in honour of most of the principal *lāi* in the Meitei pantheon. But it may also be carried out at a village level for a host of lesser deities. More significantly the *Harāoba* rituals play an important part in the domestic festival, in honour of the ancestral *lāi* of each *sagei*, known as *Lāi Chāklon Katpa*.

*Lāi Harāoba* means literally 'pleasing the god,' and the essence of the ritual is that it is performed to call up the *lāi* and to give him pleasure. It is unlikely that the phrase should be understood in the active sense to mean, as Nilakanta Singh believes (1961 : 30), 'the merrymaking of the gods and goddesses'. The essence of the ritual is that it is performed to gain the favour of the *lāi*, and it is performed by the *māibās* and *māibīs* as priests and priestesses, not as representatives of the gods. Shakespear's phrase 'the pleasing of the god' is preferable.

As it stands the *Lāi Harāoba* is evidently a composite festival and consists of episodes of diverse origins. It is possible that it was originally an ancestral ritual. The fact that the *Harāoba* is performed in honour of certain gods (for example Pākhangbā, Thāngjing and so on) whom we have

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25 The documentation in English on the *Lāi Harāoba* is limited to Shakespear (1910a and 1913a), E. Nilakanta Singh (1961) and Lightfoot (1960). In Manipuri there is Kulachandra Singh's *Meitei Lāi Harāoba*.

suggested to be ancestral deities of certain of the *yeks* makes this a possibility. It is supported by the fact, noted above, that the ritual of the *Harāoba*, in a simplified form, is performed at the festival for the *sagei lāi*. Furthermore Shakespear (1910 : 351) has noticed that the *Lāi Harāoba* has many points of similarity to Kuki ancestral rituals. The term *lāi* is not limited to gods in the formal sense, and could apply to the *apokpa*. The possibility that what we have in the *Lāi Harāoba* is basically an ancestral ritual cannot be ruled out.

The *Lāi Harāoba* has three main forms, although the differences in observance between them are relatively minor. They are the Kanglei, which is the *Harāoba* as carried out at the palace ; the Moirāng form, the manner carried out by the Moirāng *yek*, especially at the *Harāoba* in honour of Thāng-jing ; and the Chakpa form, which is basically the Loi observance. The main difference between the first two is in certain of the dance formations and the addition, in Moirāng, of a dramatic episode depicting the romantic story of Khamba and Thoibi.<sup>26</sup> In spite of slight variations the basic pattern is always the same, regardless of the *lāi* for whom the festival is being performed. Seven basic sections can be isolated.

1. The *Lāi Ikoubā* : this consists in the calling of the *lāi* up out of the water.

2. *Lāibou Jagoi* ; a dance with antiphonal singing representing the life cycle of the *lāi*.

3. The *Pānthoibi Jagoi* : a dance depicting the romantic tale of Nongpok Ningthou and *Pānthoibi*.

4. *Lāiren Mathek* : a communal dance in which the circular pattern representing the python is danced out.

5. *Ougri Hangel* : a further communal dance designed to bring wealth, which leads into

26 Khamba was of high birth, but penniless; Thiobi was the daughter of the king of Moirang. The story tells of the various trials of both before they were able to marry. After their marriage Thoibi killed her husband in error, and in remorse committed suicide. The legend gave rise to many ballads, and was the subject of an epic poem by the modern Manipuri poet Hijam Angahal Singh.

6. *Thabal Chongba* : 'dancing by moonlight' in a circle.

7. *Nongkarol* : the sending of the *lāi* back to heaven.

Various other episodes may be included ; further communal dances, comic interludes, the rite of *saroi-khāngba* designed to ward off evil spirits, and (at least in earlier times) sporting events. But these are not of the essence of the *Lāi Harāoba*.

Some of the seven elements listed above were almost certainly independent entities at some stage in the development of the festival. The *Lāiren Mathek* dance is limited to the *Kanglei Harāoba* and is connected with the python manifestation of *Pākhangbā*. It was almost certainly originally connected with the *Ningthouja yek* alone. The episode of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Pānthoibi* is always danced in *Tangkhum* costume, and therefore the possibility of a *Tangkhum* origin for this section cannot be ruled out. In support of this it should be noted that the cultivation process of *jhuming*, which figures in this dance, is a specifically Naga one. *Ougri Hangel* is said to have been introduced by King *Loiyāmba*, and this is supported by the *Ck* ( p. 5). The *thabal chongba*, which has been referred to above in connection with *Yāosvang*, may well have originally been a Spring dance. The *Lāibou Jagoi*, whatever its origin, now stands as a separate entity depicting the life-cycle of the *lāi*, and is not necessarily connected with any of the other sections of the festival. There remain the *lāi ikouba* and *nongkārōl*, which evidently go together as the beginning and end of the festival, the calling up of the *lāi* and the sending of him back to heaven. The first is a lengthy process, which will be described in detail below. It begins with the calling up of the *lāi* from the water and is followed by other rites at the *lāiphām*. A prominent feature of this part is the *lāi*-possession of the principal *māibi*, in which state she utters oracles. This section of the *Harāoba* may well have been the core around which, with the later additions, the present complicated festival grew up. *Shakespeare* (1910a : 351 and 1913 : 428) says that the basic idea is that the *lāi* is usually quiescent and has to be raised : he then shows his power by



taking possession of the officiants. We may suggest then that from this beginning, the *Harāoba* as now carried out has been formed by the addition of diverse elements from different sources.

*Lāi Harāoba* takes place in the Manipuri month of *Kālen* (April-May) and normally lasts a little over a week. Certain days of the month are regarded as propitious, and on one of these days the festival must be commenced. Propitious days are those which contain the numbers 1,2,3,5 and 8.<sup>27</sup> The *lāi* itself is represented in several different ways, but never by an image. The original representation of the *lāi* was by a pair of bamboo tubes, which may have contained relics. At a later stage of development the *lāi* came to be represented by brass or wooden masks,<sup>28</sup> with cloths placed below and above as though they were dressed. The simplicity of representing the god has not been compromised, however. For in recent times a piece of wood or iron (Shakespear 1910a : 351) was used, and today coins and bamboo tubes are still used, for cultic purposes. The absence of images indicates that Hindu iconography had not influenced Meitei worship at all at the time when this rite received its present form.

The course of the *Lāi Harāoba* is complicated, and in what follows we shall attempt to describe those elements which are common to all three forms in the order in which they occur, and to point out, where appropriate, the additional ceremonies included in one or other of these forms.

On the night before the *Harāoba* lights are kept burning in the houses throughout the hours of darkness, presumably with the intention of discouraging the evil spirits. The representation of the *lāi* is to be placed on a wooden bench in the shrine and clothed. On the following morning a *māibī* sits before

<sup>27</sup> i.e., the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 8th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 15th, 18th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 25th, 28th days of the month.

<sup>28</sup> The masks were carved to represent human features. Shakespear (1913 : 427) observed a mask representing Pānthoibi at Wangu which, curiously, had horns. The masks were not identified with the *lāi*, they simply represented it.

the water from which the *lāi* is to be called up, chanting and ringing a handbell. This procedure, called *lāimāng phamba* ('sitting before the *lāi*') may last for over an hour. The *māibī* usually falls into a trance and speaks in unintelligible syllables. These are interpreted in terms of the welfare of the village and people. The *lāi ikouba* ('calling up of the *lāi*') can now take place. Several pairs of cultic objects are used for this, each of which has a specific name and function. The principal ones are as follows :

1. *Ihāifu* : an earthen pot, inside which is placed a banana leaf which protrudes at the neck of the pot ; this is turned down at the rim of the pot, and tied with handwoven thread of a fathom's length. The thread for the god (*lāiyingthou*) consists of nine strands, that for the *lāirema* has seven.<sup>29</sup>

2. *Leiyom* : this is attached to the other end of the thread. It consists of three layers of banana leaf : that for the *lāiyingthou* faces downwards and contains fourteen buds of the *lāngthrei* plant ; that for the *lāirema* faces upwards and contains seven buds.

3. *Khayom* : this is similar to the *leiyom*, but consists of seven layers of banana leaf and contains rice, eggs and three *lāngthrei* buds tied together with *paya* (bamboo strips). That for the male *lāi* faces downwards and is tied with nine strands ; that for the female faces upwards and has seven strands.

4. *Konyāi* : these are gold and silver pieces. In the *Moirāng Harāobz* in honour of the god Thāngjing each area provides its own procession, bearing its *lāi* emblem on a litter. These converge on the shrine where the emblems are installed. In the Kanglei form certain ceremonies have to be observed at the shrine before the procession can move off. Those who are to carry the *lāi* must stand on a piece of

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29 The significance of the number nine for the *lāiyingthou* and seven for the *lāirema* is as follows. In the beginning nine gods brought earth from heaven, and seven goddesses took it and threw it upon the water where they danced. These deities were the offspring of the original *Jāiyingthou* and *lāirema*, and themselves the begetters of the *umanglāi*.

banana leaf facing the shrine. The *māibī* will then wrap the *ihāifu* (pots) in a cloth and tie them round the necks of those who are to carry them. She then dances the *lāihou jagoi* (opening dance) to the tune of the *pena*.<sup>30</sup> The procession then moves off to the water from which the *lāi* will be called up. Usually the *māibā* and the *māibī* leads, with the musicians, then come the two men bearing the short swords which belong to the god ; after these come the women carrying his brass vessels and the *lāi*-bearers, who are followed by those carrying the *leiyom* and *ihāifu*. The *lāi*-bearers must have a canopy held over them. On arrival at the water two preliminary rites are carried out by the *māibī*. The first of these is called *yu-khāngba* and consists of the offering of *yu* (rice-beer) to the *lāi*. Bamboo containers are placed in the ground before the water, nine for the *lāiyingthou* and seven for the *lāirema*. These are then filled with *yu*. The second rite is the offering of the *khayom*. Various food offerings are brought with the *khayom*-fruit, flour, *kabok*—and carried by women, who stand with the rest in two rows facing the water. The *māibī* first offers the *konyai* (gold and silver coins) by throwing them into the water. She then invokes the *lāi* by name :

‘(Name) come : your people will celebrate your *harāoba*.’  
 Next she takes the pair of *khayom* packets, taking care to hold that for the *lāiyingthou* in her right hand and that for the *lāirema* in her left, and offers them by casting them into the waters. This having been completed she now may begin the rites to do with the *ihāifu* (pots). She takes the *lāiyingthou*’s *ihāifu* again in her right hand and the *lāirema*’s in her left hand and performs dance steps facing in turn the four directions guarded by Thāngjing, Mārjing, Wāngbaren and Koubru. The *ihāifu* are then returned to their bearers. The homage

30 The *pena* is a kind of one-stringed fiddle : the body is made from gourd or cocoanut shell, the neck of bamboo and the string and bow of horsehair. The bridge is of metal and the pitch may be altered by changing the position of the bridge. The bow has small bells attached to it which sound when the *pena* is played.

to the *māikei-nyākpa* (the four guardians of the points of the compass) is performed with the minimum of steps but with graceful hand movements.

The *māibī* now takes the thread (*hiri*) from the *ihāifu* and unwinds it, tying the *leiyom* to a wooden spindle *hirichei* = thread stick) three times. Every precaution is taken to prevent the thread from falling to the ground, and it is therefore passed over the *māibī*'s shoulder. The *māibī* covers her head and crouches beside the water. Holding a handbell in her left hand she takes the *leiyom* with her right hand and immerses it in the water, all the while chanting the creation hymn *leihourol*. She may at this stage become possessed and utter the words of the *lāi*. As long as the *māibī* rings her handbell the *pena* is played. At the conclusion of the utterance the handbell is set down on a banana leaf (it should not directly touch the ground) and the *leiyom* is wrapped in the thread and placed in its appropriate *ihāifu*. This is done for the *leiyom* of both *lāiningthou* and *lāirema*. The actual *ikouba* is now completed.

The conveying of the *lāi* in procession back to the *lāisang* (shrine) follows immediately, and is called *lāi-hēgaba*, the disembarking of the god. This title is significant in view of the corresponding rite in *nongkarol* where the *lāi* returns to its original place symbolically in a boat. The procession must take place in the correct order, and is preceded by a dance for the prosperity of the people. The procession is headed by a woman bearing on her head a pot (*ishāifu*) containing water which has been taken from the place of the *ikouba*. In the courtyard of the shrine trays have been set out containing fish, salt, baskets of paddy, duck, pigeon, *sel* (bell-metal coin), and money. The woman bearing the *ishāifu* pot has to step over these, followed by all in the procession.<sup>31</sup> While all are thus passing over the trays the *māibī* continues to ring her bell and the *pena* player plays the tune of the *higarol* (disembarking).

31 This is unusual : Manipuris are usually very careful not to step over food.

The threads of the two *leiyom* are then spread out. The *lāiningthou's* is held by the *māibā* with the help of three male assistants ; the *lāirema's* is spread by the *māibi* who has three female helpers. The assistants must approach the *ihāifu* containing the *leiyom* with slow steps at the *māibis* shout of 'Hiri' (=thread). The *ishāifu* ( the pot containing the *ikouba* water) must not touch the ground, and, like the *māibi's* hand-bell earlier in the ceremony, must be placed on a banana leaf. The *māibi* and *māibā* then approach the *lāi* representations which have been deposited at the shrine, and with the *leiyom* touch these representations at the place where the navel of the god is supposed to be. The two pots (*ihāifu*) are then placed on the side appropriate to the male and female deities. The *leiyom* are then unwrapped. Five of the *lāingthrei* buds from the *lāiningthou's leiyom* are placed between the male and female deities : these are thought to be for the Guru Ātiyā Sidaba, but are then divided, three for the *lāiningthou* and two for the *lāirema*. The remaining nine buds are then placed before the *lāiningthou* and the seven from the *lāirema's leiyom* placed before her. This ritual is termed *lei hunba*, the spreading of the buds or flowers.

The next part of the ritual focusses on the four-legged stool on which the representation of the *lāi* is placed. Banana leaves are used to represent the various parts of the *lāi*. Firstly four leaves are placed face up at the four feet of the stool, and one leaf is placed beneath the stool face downwards, which is regarded as 'spreading the belly' ; next three leaves, joined together, are placed in the front ('spreading the head'). Near the head on the right side nine leaves are placed face downwards for the nine *lāibungthou* (see note 29) and on the left seven, also face downwards, for the seven *lāinura*. On these leaves the offerings are placed—a hand of bananas, sugar cane, fruit, *kabok* and other sweets. The bananas for the *lāiningthou* are, as is usual, placed face downwards, those for the *lāirema* face up. The *māibi* must now perform a ceremony of appeasement. A cloth, sewn in the centre, is folded and placed on the ground, and rice, fruit, a *chang* bunch of bananas, *kabok*

and *konyai* (coins) placed on it. *Tāiren* and other plants are then dipped into the *ishāifu* (the pot containing the water taken from where *ikouba* took place) and then sprinkled. This rite, which is meant to keep away evil influences, is done to the singing and playing of the *pena* player.

The *māibā* then relates a series of riddles and narratives beginning with the shout *hoi*. This is called *hoilāoba* (shouting *hoi*).

The next main episode is the *lāibou jagoi*.<sup>32</sup> *Lāibou* has been interpreted as a corruption of *lāi pou* 'birth of the *lāi*.' The whole episode portrays the life-cycle of the *lāi* from conception. The whole begins with the *pena* player singing and playing the lyric *Hoiron Haya*.<sup>33</sup> The words express the desire of the *lāi* for intercourse, and during the singing of the lyric *māibī* dances a movement known as the *khayom jagoi*. The second stage is the building of the body; the creation of various parts of the body is described in order in thirty-eight stages. After each stage the *māibī* and other participants perform a short dance step (*leishi jagoi*) turning to each of the four directions. Finally the infusion of the spirit into the body is represented. The actual birth is introduced with a shout from the *māibī*: the child is about to be born, the days of gestation are completed and now a birth-house is required. The portrayal here is highly dramatic, *māibī* and congregation sing antiphonally, the people responding to the *māibī*'s lead.

*Māibī* ; The child has turned, bring in the mat.

People : It is brought. (*Leishi Jagoi*)

*Māibī* : Let the midwife come in.

People ; She has come, has come.

*Māibī* : The blood has come, the water is broken.

People : It has broken, has broken. (*Leishi jagoi*)

*Māibī* : The child has come, the head has come first, I

32 Or *lāibou khuttek* : *khuttek* is the hand gestures, equivalent to *mudrā*. *Jagoi* is the Manipuri word for dance.

33 *Hoirong* is properly the rectum, but here it presumably means the vagina, the first line "O *hoiron*, O *nage*" means "let me have intercourse".

can see the head. The child is born.

People : Is born, is born.

The responsive singing continues through the stages of the cutting of the placenta, the bathing of the new-born child, and its feeding at the breast. The child begins to grow :

*Māibī* : The child grows daily, he is moving his arms and legs.

People<sup>4</sup> : Yes, yes.

*Māibī* : (Making as if to throw up the child) : Let the child grow, while the cucumber is growing and the sun is high, you child of Soraren.

People : You, daughter of Soraren, grow while the cucumber is growing and the sun is high.

*Māibī* : The child is growing, has grown up. He is big, he says he will build a house, he wishes to wear clothes.

People : Let us dress him. (*Māibī* portrays the dressing of the child.)

*Māibī* : Let us dance, ya ya hoyo hoyo.

People : Hoya ya.

There follows the *yumsharol khutthek* which depicts the building of the house. The various stages of planning, digging the foundations and building are danced out : the house is then offered to the *lāi*. The singing is again antiphonal.

Before the next episode in the life-cycle, that which describes the jhuming process, an interlude is inserted. This is the *Pānthoibi jagoi*, which describes the remantic meeting between Pānthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou. As we have suggested above the *Pānthoibi Jagoi* was probably not originally connected with the *lāibou jagoi* cycle. Its inclusion at this point is no doubt because the couple were thought to have met while Pānthoibi was engaged in jhuming, and this is the next item to be shown in dance. The *Pānthoibi Jagoi* differs according to the type of *Harāoba* being observed. Among the Mayang-langbam clan, who are not of pure Meitei origin, the *Pānthoibi Jagoi* observed by Shakespear took the form of a comic interlude (Shakespear 1910a : 350-1). According to this version of the folk-tale Nongpok Ningthou attempted to

drive Pānthoibi from his land, where she was jhuming without his permission. He was eventually seduced by the young lady's persistence, despite the fact that she was already married to Khāba. The dance consequently invites a certain amount of impropriety, as Shakespear points out. The Kanglei version is more sedate and based on the version of the legend described above (see chapter 2 (a)). The dance is performed by the *māibi* and the congregation and is thought to bring prosperity. It is again preceded by a short dance step to the gods of the four directions. The *māibi* then announces the arrival of Nongpok Ningthou, king of the East. He comes wearing a long garment and head-dress, with a hockey stick upon his shoulder.

*Māibi* : O servants.

People : Yes, yes.

*Māibi* : He has come, your lord. To show him respect now cover your lips.

(People cover their lips indicating Pānthoibi's shyness.)

*Māibi* : O servants.

People : Yes, yes.

*Māibi* : Serve him, fan him.

People : Yes, yes.

*Māibi* : O servants, place a mirror before him that he may admire himself.

People : Yes, yes.

(They look at their palms as if looking in a mirror.)

*Māibi* : Comb your hair.

(They act as if combing.)

*Māibi* : Bring him fruit.

People : Yes, yes.

(They act as if offering fruit with both hands.)

The episode concludes with a further dance step.

The Pānthoibi dance is followed by two more dances in the life-cycle. The first enacts the process of jhuming. The clearing of the ground is shown first, then the digging and planting of cotton. The gradual process of the growth of the plant is pictured up to its harvesting and collection into baskets. The



cleaning and spinning of the cotton follow, until a garment is made which is, according to the lyric, offered for the prosperity of the village and the long life of the king. The second episode portrays fishing and the use of the *long*, a fishing basket. The fishing is regarded in a symbolical manner as the gathering of the spirit of the *lāi*. No doubt the idea of the *lāi ikouba*, namely that the *lāi* is to be brought up out of the water, has influenced this. The *māibī* commences this section with the words :

‘Now that the cloth is complete and has been offered, let us gather the spirit of the *lāi* (congregational response). Now the *long* made of bamboo, grandmother Laisana’s *long*, grandfather Pākhangbā’s *long*, let us hold this chief *long*, let us chase away evil spirits, let us take in the five spirits, and six with the shadow.’

The *māibī* will then dance, to the music of the *pena*, imitating the gathering of fish in the trap. As the *long* is pushed away the *māibī* symbolically chases away evil spirits ; as it is drawn in she is bringing in the spirits of the *lāi*. This concludes this section of the *Harāoba*.

There follow three short sections. The first of these is the dance *Lairen Mathek*. The name means literally ‘python curve’. It is a communal dance in single file with the *māibī* as leader. The line of dancers moves in a circular pattern around the *lāisang*, and the line must not be broken until the pattern is completed. The pattern is also known as *paphel*, that is, the nine ways of the *lāiren*, and it is the symbol of Pākhangbā in his snake aspect.

The other two dances, *Ougri Hangel* and *Thabal Chongba*, are linked together. The former was introduced during the reign of King Loiyamba in the eleventh century (*CK*. p. 5) and was originally a creation hymn. As presently celebrated the *māibī* stands inside a circle of participants and chants the lyric. Four ropes are held by equal numbers of men and women. The ropes must not fall to the ground, nor must the holders move their feet while the song is being chanted. Certain ritual restrictions are also placed on the participants :

they are not permitted to eat food regarded as unclean, nor to wear unclean dress. Like other sections of the festival the song is for the welfare of land and people. A second lyric is then begun by the *māibī* and the people now offer antiphonal responses. Finally the whole circle breaks into the *thabal chongba* dance. After the completion of this the rope is coiled and presented before the *lāi*.

One further rite must be observed before the *lāi* returns to his place. This is the choosing of a wife for the *lāi*.<sup>34</sup> The *māibī* becomes possessed as the *lāi* enters her. She then utters oracles. The actual choosing of the girl is done by the *māibī*, who points her out with the aid of a hockey stick.<sup>35</sup> The girl so selected will join the *māibī* in *leishi jagoi*, and thereafter herself become a *māibī*.

The last part of the festival consists in the sending of the *lāi* back to heaven. The *māibā* again sings, describing how all these things have been done to please the *lāi*. He describes the felling of a tree in order to make a boat for the god, in which he will ascend to heaven. *Māibī* and *māibā* then enter the *lāisang*: the former begins to chant and accompanies herself on the handbell, while the *māibā* sings the *nongkarol* lyric for sending the *lāi* back to heaven. Meanwhile, outside, the *pena* is played and the congregation join in with rhythmic clapping. The *lāi* is thus conveyed to his place until the next *Harāoba*.

It remains for the various offerings to be gathered by the *māibā* and the *māibī* and distributed. The bulk of these offerings are for these officiants themselves, and for the *pena* player, and there are strict regulations as to who should receive which offering. Finally *saroi khangba* is performed. The object of this rite is to ward off the attentions of the evil spirits who have been watching the festival. Certain foodstuffs such as rice, fruit, flour, *kabok* and so on, and the plants *lāngthrei* and *heibi* are offered at the four corners of the courtyard to appease

34 Compare Eliade ( 1964 : 464 ). Elwin 1955 : 507-13.

35 The hockey stick has several cultic uses : see above on its association with Nongpok Ninghou. It is also pleasing to Mārjing, to whom it is offered with the ball on occasions of cattle epidemic.

these spirits and to ensure that the efficacy of the *Harāobā* is not nullified.

In former times the close of the *Lāi Harāoba* used to be the occasion for the performance of sports, among which hockey and wrestling were prominent. This social aspect is now unfortunately fading out.

The importance of the *Lāi Harāoba* for Manipuri religion is very great. It is not only the most important of the traditional rituals—and one which has been almost completely uninfluenced by the Hinduism—but it is also a very valuable source of information about traditional Meitei religious rituals. Whether its origin is to be found in terms of calling up or strengthening the *lāi*, of spirit-possession, or of ancestral rituals, the *Lāi Harāoba* as it is today appears as a subtle combination of all of these elements. The fusion of sacred lyrics, traditional music, and Meitei dance, make it a unique feature of Manipuri culture.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DOMESTIC FESTIVALS

The Manipuri domestic festivals fall into three classes, each of which has its own distinctive ritual and concerns a particular social group. These are the *Lāi Chāklon Katpa*, the festival in honour of the *sagei lāi*, the gods of the *sagei* (clan or extended family group); the *apokpa khurumba*, held in honour of the ancestors of the family; and finally the rituals held for the household deities Sanāmahī and Leimaren. In this chapter these will be dealt with in turn.

#### (a) *Lāi Chāklon Katpa*

The *sagei* (or *yumnak*) is, as we have indicated above, a clan group, all the members of which bear the same family name. Most *sagei* have their own particular *lāi* and *lāirema*, which they worship and which bear the name of the clan. Thus the *lāirema* of the Arāmbam Yumnak would be called *Arāmbam lāirema*, and so on. The *sagei lāi* are always male and female (the *lāi* and the *lāirembi*). These are commonly regarded as the progenitors of the *sagei*. The *sagei lāi* are kept in the custody of the *piba* and represented by two bamboo tubes, which are kept in a basket. The contents of these tubes are not displayed and are a closely guarded secret. The generally held view is that they contain relics believed to have been preserved from the original *sageipokpa*. Among some *sagei* a further development has taken place. This is the representation of the *sagei lāi* by a small cloth doll (called a *lāi fadibi*) which is wrapped in a cloth. The *yumjāo lāirembi* of the palace is represented in this way. Where this is the case it is the duty of the *māibi* to dress the *lāi fadibi*. In other cases the *lāi* is represented, as at the *lāi harāoba*, by a brass mask with a cloth placed beneath it to represent the body of the *lāi* and a second cloth on it to represent a turban. It is not clear when these developments took place; although it is evident that images came to be used more during the period of Hindu

ascendancy under Garīb Niwāz. On the other hand some informants trace the use of the mask back to the time of Khāgamba in the early seventeenth century.

Today the *sagei lāi* have lands bequeathed to them, the incomes on which are used for the upkeep of the shrine and for the expenses of the feast. These incomes are in the hands of the *piba* in whose custody the *sagei lāi* is.

The domestic festival of *Lai Chaklon Katpa* may be held in any month of the year except *Poinu* (Nov-Dec) or *Wakching* (Dec-Jan). The reason for these prohibitions is because during *Poinu* the month of harvest, the granary must not be disturbed and because *Wakching* is the month during which the rice deity *Phovoibi* is worshipped. The date for the festival for each clan is determined by the time at which they migrated into Manipur.

It is strictly confined to members of the particular *sagei* concerned and no outsiders may be admitted. However the *māibi* who officiates must not belong to the *sagei* in question. The festival is in form rather like a small scale *Lāi Harāoba*, but unlike this public festival it has to be completed in one day. On the morning of the feast the various food offerings are set out by the stool on which the *lāi* is placed in a similar manner to that of the *Lāi Harāoba*. The place of the *sageiapokpa* (clan ancestor) is between those of *lāi ningthou* and the *lāirema* but he is not represented by an outward symbol. As is usual nine buds of *lāngthrei* are placed before the *lāi ningthou* and seven before the *lāirema*: before the *apokpa* five buds are placed. On the side of the *lāi ningthou* a banana leaf is placed with rice and a hand of bananas face downwards; on the side of the *lāirema* a similar offering, but with the bananas face upwards (i.e. concave side uppermost), as is normal for the female. Behind the place for *apokpa* is placed the *chaning-chapham*. The ingredients for this are similar again, but the bananas are face down, and the offering is made for the security of the *sagei*. The *chaning* is later eaten by the *piba* and on no account must be consumed by the females of his family. Should this happen it is thought that they will become more prosperous than the *piba*.

The *ikouba*, calling of the *lāi* from the water, takes place in the same way as at *Lāi Harāoba*. The gods are then brought to the shrine and there offered the appropriate number of *lāng-threi* buds. A *pena* player may be present to sing the praises of the *lāi*, but more often than not this is done by the *māibī*. The *piba* usually carries the *lāi* and the next eldest male carries the *lāirema*; the *piba's* wife and the wife of the next eldest male bear the ritual pots for the *ikouba*. Those who bear the *lāi* must have an unblemished marriage line. The feast is usually cooked by a Brahmin. To this there is one important exception, the cooking of the large *sareng* fish. This is first offered whole to the *lāi* and then must be cooked by the *piba* himself. The offering is called *saren-chanba*. The *sareng* must be cooked in a new pot with herbs and oil only and without turmeric; the *piba* must also at this time cook rice. The pots used for this must afterwards be buried near the shrine. Before the eating of the feast the *māibī* offers sweets and flowers to the *lāi*, and again performs *saren-chanba*, this time with the cooked fish. The *lāibao* ritual then takes place. The *māibī* becomes possessed, chanting and ringing her hand-bell, and falls into a trance. In this state she delivers oracles which concern the *sagei*. The food offerings are then removed. The *chaning* offerings are for the *piba* alone, but the remainder is shared among the *sagei*. The ritual objects, symbols and clothes of the *lāi* are then carefully packed away and placed in the custody of the *piba* until the next celebration.

(b) *Apokpa khurumba*

The second group of domestic *lāi* are the ancestors of the immediate family circle. These are called the *apokpa*, from the word *pokpa* meaning 'to beget or to give birth to'. The *apokpa* are the deceased males of the previous three generations (the father, grandfather and great-grandfather), who look after the interests of the family. Worship of *apokpa* is carried out by each household as a closely knit group. The *apokpa khurumba* ('bowing down to the *apokpa*') is a very detailed ritual which must be precisely observed.

Prior to the actual *khurumba* a special invitation ceremony must be carried out at which the *apokpa* are bidden to attend the forthcoming *khurumba*. This takes place at night during the full moon, and must be performed at the particular moment when the moon falls over exactly half of the verandah of the house. At this point a variety of different offerings are set out, which consist of the following : an earthen pot, nine *haiwei*,<sup>1</sup> nine *tingthou*,<sup>2</sup> nine grains of rice which have been husked by hand, nine seeds of *thoiding* (sesamum), a beeswax lamp, and one betel leaf which must have a fresh stalk. A coin, the usual representation of the deity, must also be offered. The *lai* are bidden to come to the feast with the following formula :

'*Apokpa* (ancestors), come to eat on the day of *thāsi* (new moon).'<sup>3</sup>

The various offerings listed above are then buried in the house between the *phungga* and the *lairu*, and covered with seven layers of banana leaf.<sup>3</sup>

The actual *apokpa khurumba* itself shows the same emphasis on the details of the ritual. The food for the offerings is today purchased from the markets, but the buyer is obliged to tell the household that she is going out for the purpose of buying the offerings, and she must not look or turn back once she has done so. *Kabok* (puffed rice) and sweets must be purchased from seven different places in the market, and (a severe restriction for Manipuris) no bargaining can be entered into over the prices. These goods should be kept separate from other purchases, although they need not be obtained on seven different shopping expeditions. On arrival the shopper does not take the seven packets of sweets into the house, but keeps them in the garden on the *naktha* side. They must not be touched or be brought into the house.

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1 A particular type of flower (*massaenda frondosa*), having three different coloured flowers on each stem.

2 A kind of grass (*cynodon dactylon pers*).

3 These invitation offerings are opened during the actual *khurumba* : if the rice contained in these is seen to have sprouted this is regarded as indicating that the wishes of the household will be granted.

Two further groups of offerings are then assembled. The first set consists of a cloth (*khudei*),<sup>4</sup> a hand of bananas containing an odd number of the fruit,<sup>5</sup> a whole betel leaf and a betel nut (*kwā*). The other contains a *sareng* (a large edible fish), some vegetables and *dal*. These three items must be set out on five separate dishes.

The actual *khurumba* takes place after sunset. Various offerings are displayed on banana leaves, which have to be arranged in a special way. A large leaf, cut in a circular shape, is placed on the ground, and two smaller circles of the leaf are placed on top it. On some of these 'plates' fruits and flowers are placed, on others betel leaf covered with a further semi-circle of banana leaf, and topped by a betel nut. These offerings have to be displayed in groups of three. After the arrival of the *māibā* the raw food is first offered to Sanamahi, and then cooked. Besides the rice *yenshang* (curry) is also prepared. The rice must be cooked by the *piba* himself, or by his wife or a married woman of the household. It must never be cooked by an unmarried girl. The rice on this occasion is not washed before being cooked, and special care is taken to add exactly the right amount of water needed for the cooking, since it is not permitted either to add or to pour away water from the rice. Omens are sought from the cooking. The pot is covered with a banana leaf and tied with a strip of bamboo (*pāya*). If, during the cooking, the right side of the leaf is raised up by the steam then prosperity will follow for the *piba* himself; if it is the left side which is raised then prosperity will come to the daughters of the house.

The woman who cooks has also the task of carrying into the house a pot of water drawn from a place which is regarded as sacred to the *sagei*.<sup>6</sup> This is then added to the water used

4 The *khudei* cloth is a male garment, rather like a *dhoti*.

5 Called a *laphoi laphang chang* or 'chang' banana bunch: the Meitei have a method of counting by which the odd numbers are *chang* (life) and the even *si* (death).

6 Each *sagei* has their own specific area from which the water must be drawn: in the case of the Arambam *sagei* it is taken from the Lamphel area of Imphal, which is the source of supply for all the Luwang yek.



for cooking. The part of the food set aside for the *khāobanai*<sup>7</sup> is then set beside the foundation pillar of the house (*jatra*). Further away three places are set for the deceased *apokpa* of the *sagei*, in order of seniority thus : great-grandfather, grandfather, father. The *khudei* is set out as a kind of mat for three *apokpas*. Before they are bidden to eat the *māibā* goes outside the house and offers sweets to the *sāroi ngāroi* so that these unpredictable *lāi* will not disturb the proceedings. Before the *apokpa* come to eat it is necessary that all the lights be extinguished and everybody leave the house. The *māibā* and the *piba* subsequently re-enter the house, and the *māibā* utters mantras and bows (*khurumba*) to the *apokpa*. While this is going on all the goods of the household must be displayed and all boxes and other containers are opened for the *apokpa* to see. When the lights are relit the three meals offered to the *apokpa* are taken by the *piba*, his wife and eldest son. The portions allotted to the *khāobanai*, together with what remains of the *apokpa* offerings and the uneaten cooked rice and fish, are placed on the *khudei* and buried in a hole near the *jātra* pillar. The rice cooked during this ceremony is consumed only by the household : it must never be eaten by those outside the *sagei* since it has been offered to the *lāi* of the *sagei*. Even the *māibā* who officiates at the ceremony is not allowed to eat of the food. His payment in kind is taken to him in his own house at a later date.

In sum therefore *apokpa khurumba* is the worship with appropriate food offerings of the ancestors who are conceivably within living memory. Its sociological function lies in its ability to confirm the solidarity of the *sagei* group in their common respect for *apokpa* at a time of communal feasting.

(c) *Sanāmahi Khurumba*

We now come to the rituals connected with the household

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7 The *khaobanai* is a servant or one who accompanies the invitee : in this case it means the unseen servant of the three *apokpa*.

*lāi*, Sanāmahi and Leimaren. These *lāi* are worshipped by every household, not only by the *piba* of the *sagei*. Sanāmahi is represented, as we have noted above, by an ancient bell-metal coin (*sel*), which is placed on a shelf made of bamboo in the *Sanāmahi Kachin*. This corner is consecrated by the *māibā* before receiving the sacred objects. In fact today many households do not have the coin, and the shelf is simply left empty, but is still regarded as the household shrine of the *lāi*. The making of new Sanāmahi representations was, according to Higgins (n. d. 16), the prerogative of men from the Senjam and Aheiba *sageis*, who, under the supervision of the *Māibā Loisanng* (palace *māibā*), would make coins of the appropriate shape for the particular *salai* to which the owner belonged. According to some authorities Sanāmahi was previously represented by a pair of coins, which had to be of the same shape.<sup>8</sup>

The worship of Sanāmahi takes place at least once a year and is obligatory during *Cheirāoba*. Offerings to Sanāmahi may also be made at other significant crisis periods, such as before planting or harvest, or when there is trouble or sickness in the family. At *Cheirāoba* the household as a whole worships Sanāmahi, usually through the eldest woman of the house. Offerings are largely of foodstuffs, such as *tāl* (Hindu *lūchī*), fish, rice flour, fruit and *kabok*. Certain wild flowers are also offered at this time.

It is the eldest woman in the family also who performs the monthly Sanāmahi ritual. This is carried out only during the daylight hours, in either the morning or the afternoon. It takes place at the beginning of the month, on the second or third day of the new moon. The offerings, as at *Cheirāoba*, consist of fruit and flowers, but also of uncooked foods. At

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8 Ancient Manipuri coins differed in shape according to the issuing king. Where a pair of coins were used they are regarded as representing the male and female principles. The difficulty with this view is that Sanāmahi is always masculine, and there is no evidence of his having any other spouse but Leimaren, who is always represented by a pot of water. It is altogether unlikely that Sanāmahi was androgynous.

the monthly *Sanāmahi Khurumba* the divining rite of *usin* may also take place, although it is not obligatory here as it is at *Cheirāoba*. The particular type of *Sanāmahi* ceremonies performed on this festival have been described above.

(d) *Sanāmahi Apoiba*

There is a more sinister aspect to *Sanāmahi* ritual which is designed to bring harm and discord to a rival household. In this ritual the *lāi* is called *Sanāmahi Apoiba*, which means 'untamed, undomesticated, wild'. This aspect of the *lāi* seems almost certainly to be comparatively recent as there is no evidence for it in earlier periods. The psychology behind it is that certain rites may be carried out which make the *Sanāmahi* of another household permit the entrance of a wild *lāi* or become wild himself. The *Sanāmahi* of the house to be attacked must first of all be enticed to vacate his house and leave it unprotected. This is done by a *māibā* only, who offers him flowers, fruit and *pān* leaf. The *Sanāmahi Apoiba* may then enter. Like the domestic *Sanāmahi* he is represented by a coin, which is secretly buried in the house or garden of the house concerned by a *māibā*, with suitable mantras. Calamity, disease and misfortune are then sure to result. The family upon which these misfortunes come will immediately know that *Sanāmahi Apoiba* has been sent from outside and make the appropriate offerings to placate the *lāi*. This takes the form of a *thouniba* (appeasement), which is made to the *Sanāmahi* of the house, to induce him to return and become once again propitious. There are various superstitions connected with the belief in the efficacy of the *Sanāmahi Apoiba* coin. Thus for example it is thought that if one sleeps before the coin unwittingly death is sure to result; if one changes clothes before it illness will follow, and so on. It should be noted that the domestic *Sanāmahi* may also become *Apoiba* if certain rules of ritual cleanliness are neglected. Thus if for instance a woman during her menstrual period were to pass before the *Sanāmahi Kachin* the *lāi* might show his displeasure by becoming *Apoiba*. While *Sanāmahi Apoiba* seems to be a late development, a

corruption of the Sanāmahī concept in the interests of sorcery, it is nevertheless strongly believed in even today, when any domestic crisis may be regarded as the result of such Sanāmahī Apoiba activity.

## CHAPTER V

### THE RITES OF PASSAGE

Vaiṣṇavism had a considerable effect upon the rites of passage as practised in Manipuri society. The traditional rites of birth, marriage and death were, at several points, modified and expanded by the addition of Hindu elements, while at the same time preserving their specifically Meitei character. There was no rite of initiation in Manipur prior to the coming of Hinduism, and the rite of *upanayana* represented therefore something quite new. It has consequently been adopted in its classical form. The one important variation is that in Manipur Hindu dietary restrictions were not imposed on children prior to their taking of the thread, and even meat was allowed to them. Manipuri Brahmin boys normally take the thread between the ages of nine and fourteen, Kṣatriyas—the bulk of the population—slightly later, between fourteen and sixteen. The thread of the Brahmin has nine strands, while that of the Kshatriya consists of six strands only. Initiation as a whole consists both of the taking of the thread (*lugun thangba*) and a subsequent ceremony known as *lāiming louba*, meaning 'taking the name of the god.' The first it was usually the prerogative of the Brahmin to perform, while the latter was performed frequently by the king or a guru. In this way initiation was always in Manipur ultimately under the control of the ruler.

The remaining rites of passage—birth, marriage and death—today follow the basic Hindu pattern, but retain at several points local traditional elements which go back to pre-Hindu times. This is particularly the case when a special ceremony is called for because of peculiar circumstances; for example the death of a young infant or of a mother in childbirth requires rites which are not derived from the Hindu system. The same applies to preliminary rites to marriage. The documentary evidence for these rites is scanty in the extreme, and consequently in this and in the following sections the material

here described is largely based on field work in which much of the information was derived from pandits and *māibās*.

(a) *Birth rituals*

Hodson (1910 : 112) remarks that Manipuri birth ceremonies are those commonly observed by Vaiṣṇav Hindus, with the addition of a small household *pūjā* to the *lāi*. His evidence in this respect seems to have been rather defective, for in point of fact there are today several local additions to the Hindu ceremonies.

During the period of gestation the movements of either parent are not restricted, nor is any special diet imposed upon the mother. At some time after the fifth month of pregnancy a ceremony called *kokthokchamihokpa* used to be performed, although it is little observed at the present time. In this the mother is seated, and her husband stands behind her, moving a burning piece of pine wood behind her head. He manipulates this torch until the shadow of his wife's head falls on her lap: the light is then extinguished. A *māibā* then brings a pot of water which is placed in the centre of the house, and offerings of betel nut and fruit are made. After the pot and the offerings have been prayed over by the *māibā* the woman washes her hands and face outside the house with the water from the pot. The reason for this ceremony is given as enabling the woman to retain her strength during pregnancy and childbirth. According to the Manipuri concept, man has six souls; the last of these is the shadow. The shadow is thus commonly regarded as part of the personality, and it seems likely that the object of the rite is to prevent the shadow, with its vital power, from becoming dissociated from the body. Ritual washing is again not uncommon in rites of passage, and associated with the ritual of cleansing in passing from one stage of life to another—here to motherhood. In addition to this the woman is obliged to worship the household *lāi* with appropriate offerings in the fifth and seventh months of her pregnancy.<sup>1</sup>

1 There are special offerings for barren women: a polo stick and

For the actual birth a special house is built by wealthy people. In the case of the wives of the king the birth house was called *wangonsang*, in the case of others *chaboksang*. The motive for building such birth-houses is that should the birth take place in the house itself no religious ceremony could then take place in it again until it has been made ritually pure.

The midwives are also called *māibīs* but are different from the *Māibīs* who carry out the religious rituals, nor do they wear a distinctive dress. Traditionally the child should be delivered in a kneeling posture. The *māibīs* must cut the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife. Before doing this the *māibī* invokes the six souls to take up their place in the child :

‘O five souls—the shadow also a sixth—O come.’

The placenta is then put in an earthen pot and buried in the *yenakha* (the raised surround about the house). If the child is a male the placenta is buried on the right side of the house, if a girl on the left. For three days the child has to be wet-nursed, and only after this period may the mother nurse it herself. The mother is confined to the house for six days, when *ṣvāstī pūjā* takes place in the evening. For the ceremony the family of the mother bring food, which she herself is now permitted to eat. Presents are also brought for the child, and the father gives a feast. The *pūjā* is the prerogative of the Brahmins.

On the morning of the sixth day the ceremony of *yapanthaba*<sup>2</sup> is carried out. At this offerings of uncooked rice, vegetables, *yendem* (a kind of plant), *heibi*, roast *ngāmu* (fish), chilli and salt are placed on banana leaf. These are then mixed and placed on six pieces of banana leaf on a winnowing fan. The child is then bathed and covered with a clean cloth, which must not have been touched by the mother. A branch of *tāiren* is then taken and used to sprinkle water on the child. The *māibi*

ball must be offered to Marjing and Okmaren. Tradition has it that these *lai* invented the game of polo, which they played at the dawn of creation, and they therefore take delight in such offerings.

2 This ceremony is also called *lai ipanthaba*. See (c) below.

then pretends to feed the child with the prepared mixed food. This is repeated five times with the words :

‘Father’s food, grandfather’s food, human food : eat this.’

On the sixth occasion the wording is changed :

‘O five souls and the shadow, this is the food of life : eat this.’

The *māibī* simulates the washing of the child’s mouth six times. The *māibī* then places the child on the winnowing fan, removing the food first. The *yōtsebi*<sup>3</sup> is then brought into the room in which the mother is. A fire is lit under it. The *māibī* then moves the winnowing fan, with the baby in it, above the fire with the words :

‘You are about to fall in the fire, you are about to fall in the water.’

The mother is then asked by the *māibī* whether she wants to keep the child or the fan and whether she will accept valuables in exchange for the child. The mother asks for the child. The process is repeated and on the last occasion the mother gives to the *māibī* a gold ring.

The mother may now bathe, and the straw bed on which birth was given is destroyed. Later in the day a rite takes place in which the maternal uncle of the child shoots arrows to the four directions (north-east, south-east, north-west, south-west) for the purpose of driving away evil spirits from the child.

The mother is still subject to restrictions even after *svāstī pūjā*. For the twelve days after birth she is permitted to eat only rice and fish, with salt. For the following four weeks her diet is diversified, but she is still obliged to eat alone and may not cook for other members of the household. On the twelfth day the house itself is cleansed, by a Brahmin sprinkling water in it with a branch of *tulasī*. The defilement in fact affects not only the mother, but to some degree the whole *sagei*. The *sagei* must purify itself by ceremonial washing of

3 A three-legged tripod, used for placing food on when cooking over the fire.



clothes, and by the destruction of old cooking pots and their replacement by new ones. The *māibi* who acted as midwife is also temporarily unclean, and purifies herself by bathing.

(b) *Marriage Ceremonial*

Marriage ceremonial in Manipur, as in several other parts of India, consists in a fusion of Hindu rites with certain traditional features. While the orthodox *brāhmyā* form of marriage is not uncommon, Manipuri custom leans more to the non-Brahmanical *gāndhārva* form, usually with the accompanying rites.

The restrictions on marriage between certain degrees of kinship may owe something to Hindu influence, for there is little evidence which would suggest such restrictions in earlier times.<sup>4</sup>

The preliminaries to marriage consist of four distinct stages :

(i) *Hāinaba*. This is the initial approach of the parents of the boy to the girl's family. Gifts of fruit and sometimes other items must be taken and presented to the girl's parents.

4 Marriage is today forbidden between those of the same *gotra*. It is usually between those of the same caste, although since most Manipuris (except the Brahmins) are Kshatriyas intermarriage has not given rise to the same plethora of sub-castes as elsewhere in India. Brahmin men may marry outside caste. Marriage to a non-Hindu naturally involves loss of caste. The *yeks* are generally, but not always, coterminous with the *gotras*. Those of the same *yek* may intermarry if they belong to different origin groups. Thus a member of the *nongpokharam* (people who migrated into Manipur from the west) may marry into the *nongchupharam* (people who migrated from the east) even though they may belong to the same *yek*. The origins of different *sagei* are known from their *sagei* names. There is a further restriction on marriage between people who are descended from the same mother, though of different fathers. Further a man may not marry a girl who has the same name as his mother. The *piba* is not permitted to marry a woman who is a *tuman* (i.e., who is a widow or has been divorced). The whole question of marriage restrictions is well discussed by L. Ibungohal Singh (1963: 15, 94). It should be noted that these restrictions are now no longer strictly regarded: intermarriage between prohibited degrees now may take place without stigma, and even marriage outside the Hindu community results in few sanctions.

If the latter regard the union as unsuitable then negotiations stop forthwith ; if it is regarded as a possibility horoscopes are read, and if these prove favourable a meeting is arranged between the elders of both joint families to discuss the matter further.

(ii) *Yāthangthanaba*. This stage is the official giving of consent to the marriage. The eldest male of the groom's family visits the girl's father and relatives. The negotiating males show their agreement to the union by prostrating themselves before each other.

(iii) *Waroiopot pūba*. At this stage the contract is sealed by the groom's family approaching the girl's house with their relatives. Food is brought by the visitors for consumption at this time.

(iv) *Heijapot* (or *heijingpot*). The function of this part of the preparations is to make the impending marriage known to all. The groom's family therefore come, together with all their relatives, friends and acquaintances. It is once again their responsibility to provide food for the occasion. If this stage is omitted for any reason it could become, after marriage, a cause of discord and of abuse from their neighbours. During *heijapot* the groom's party must bring in addition five, seven or more baskets of fruit, of an odd number (*chang*)<sup>5</sup> which are presented to the *apokasa*, the originator of the girl's *sagei*. These baskets must include *heikru*<sup>6</sup> and *heining*<sup>7</sup>. A *phanek* and a *lāiphi* (garments) are offered to the household *lāi*, together with fruits, *kabok*, betel leaf and nut. Gifts must be brought to the *lamlāi* ( the *lāi* of the area in which the girl resides ) and also to the *sageilāi* ( the *lāi* of her particular *sagei* ). These gifts of food are reserved for the *lāi* concerned, and must on no account be distributed. They are kept inside the house and only presented to the appropriate *lāi* when all the guests have departed. They may then be eaten by members of the household only, not by outsiders. Other portions of

5 See above, Chapter 4 (b), note 5.

6 See above Chapter 3 (b), n. 13.

7 A large species of hog-plum, *spondias Magnifera*.

food are set aside for the girl and her immediate friends, who remain within the house during the *heijapot* festivities. The rest of the food is distributed to the guests. Before sharing the betel and coconut the eldest male relatives again prostrate themselves before each other.

The day before the wedding the groom himself is formally invited to the wedding. This is done by a younger brother or other suitable male relative of the bride. The groom is garlanded, and offered betel leaf, betel nut of a *chang*<sup>8</sup> and flowers. The groom responds by raising the flowers to his forehead. The wedding ceremonial takes place in the girl's house. The groom is conducted in by a woman, whose eldest child must be a son and still living, who is not a widow, and who has been married according to the correct rites. She brings also a basket (*iruknungshang*) which contains rice, two discs of salt, one on the other, three strands of cotton, tobacco leaf and ginger. These are covered with a white cloth and tied with a bamboo strip. The basket is left at the *phungga lāiru* and is opened on the fifth day after the wedding by the groom's party. The rice is at that time poured out on to a winnowing fan and the fortunes of the couple are read according to the position of the rice. It is also considered a good omen if ants or spiders' webs are discovered in the rice.

At the marriage itself, as at the *heijapot*, the groom's family is obliged to bring offerings to the *apokasa*. These consist of fruit, *kabok*, and sweets, and must be contained in two baskets. The *lamlāi* are similarly honoured. For their part the girl's family give a dowry according to their means. This must include a Tangkhul cloth.<sup>9</sup> The groom's family reciprocates by presenting a bridal gift. This normally includes such items as a *phanek*, an *inaphi* (shawl), gold ornaments and other suitable presents. If both parties are of the same social rank they will also give clothes to the respective near relatives, but if they are not of the same rank then the party of lower rank

<sup>8</sup> See note 5 above.

<sup>9</sup> According to legend the Tangkhul cloth was used by Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi.

only gives to that of the higher. The groom's family must also provide the *athenpot*, a large tray of food. The immediate family of the bride must eat half of this and add more food to it before returning it to the donors.

The wedding ceremony is usually accompanied by *kirtans*, at which suitable religious lyrics are sung. After this, the formal joining of the couple takes place. The bride seats herself in front of the man and opposite him: various mantras are recited and the genealogy of the couple is rehearsed. The bride then rises and walks around the groom seven times<sup>10</sup> casting flowers on him. She then resumes her place and the couple place garlands around each other's necks. The immediate families then prostrate themselves before each other and again before the three *apokpa*. The couple are then joined to each other by the tying together of their *inaphis*.<sup>11</sup> Finally the pair place betel leaf and sweetmeats in each other's mouths.

The prospects of the couple are determined in the Manipuri fashion by the rite of *usin*. Two fish are set free in the pond and their movements observed. If the fish swim well and together then a happy and prosperous marriage will result. If the fish do not swim together the marriage will not be a success.

In the evening of the wedding the bride takes her first meal in her husband's family's house. This is shared by all the groom's *sagei*, those who are not able to attend being sent portions of the meal. A curious rite at this meal consists in the offering of a roasted trout to the new bride. If she begins by eating the head she is assumed to be a *hingchabi* (witch)!

The above description is of marriage as it is observed when

10 This seems to replace the *agni-pradakshina*, which is not usually observed in Manipuri weddings. The significance of seven may be taken from the Hindu *saptapādi*, the seven steps taken by the bride and groom before the sacred fire, which are meant to represent the seven blessings of food, strength, wealth, happiness, progeny, cattle and devotion.

11 In other parts of India the nuptial garments are joined as the pair clasp hands over the sacred fire.

all the correct procedures are carried out, that is in the Meitei equivalent to the *brāhmya* form. There is however another, and today very common, type of marriage which is closer to the Hindu *gāndhārva* marriage. It should be noted however that this is not elopement in the strict sense of the word. The girl's parents are very often aware of the situation and give their consent if they approve of the man of her choice. The couple do not live in the man's house prior to the ceremonial, but stay in the house of a close relative on the man's side. Furthermore they do not at this stage cohabit, but are on the contrary closely chaperoned.<sup>12</sup> Word is sent to the parents of the girl to appraise them of the situation and a marriage ceremonial then takes place in the usual way. The action of the girl in leaving her parent's house is not regarded as morally reprehensible, nor is any stigma attached to this kind of marriage. However 'elopement' of this kind is regarded as binding, and if for any reason the wedding did not take place a girl who had acted in this way would not be acceptable as a bride to another man.

### (c) *Death rituals*

As Hodson (1910: 116) has pointed out, Meitei methods of disposal of the dead have been extensively Hinduized and today are firmly in the hands of the Brahmins. Only in cases of untimely death do the traditional customs show through with any degree of importance and do the *māibās* play any extensive role. These abnormalities will be dealt with in more detail below.

Death should not take place in the house if this can be avoided. The dying person must be carried out of the house by the left side of the verandah (the *naktha*), and placed in a *khangbok*, a small hut erected outside. Death is not regarded as having taken place until *rigor mortis* sets in. If

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J2. McCulloch (1859: 19) speaks of the ceremonial taking place after cohabitation: this is not correct. There is no cohabitation before the actual ceremony.

this occurs in the house, the whole building would be regarded as unclean (*mangba*), and in pre-war days the house would be destroyed.<sup>13</sup> The body is even today placed in a coffin before cremation, which supports the contention that burial was practised in pre-Hindu times in Manipur. This is also indicated by certain passages in the *OK*.<sup>14</sup> According to an ancient legend which concerns the death of the son of Koubru the corpse was also previously wrapped in banana leaves.

The body is bathed before cremation and dressed while still in the *khangbok*; it is then taken out with its feet towards the road, as if it were going on a journey. Before the body is removed wood, four bamboo poles, a canopy, and a beam from the house are transported to the cremation ground. The fire for the cremation pyre must also be taken from the deceased's house. Cremation takes place, according to Hindu custom, by the riverside.

At the cremation the clothes, gold and ornaments are removed from the body. The immediate family walk around the pyre, which is then lit by the male next of kin. Males may stay until the body has been consumed, but women and children leave after the fire has been started. These have to have baths in the river before they return to their home. Again they are not permitted to enter the courtyard of the house until they have been met, at the gate, by someone carrying fire to keep away the evil spirits. Only then are they permitted to enter the courtyard and to change their wet clothes. This must be done outside the house. Before the family mourners arrive home it is essential that all the cooking pots be cleansed and the whole house purified with water. The bedding of the deceased has also to be removed and burnt.

The frontal bone of the deceased is removed from the ashes and placed in a bamboo tube. It is then buried by the

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13 The practice of *mangba* disappeared during the war, when the high mortality rate made this measure impracticable. The rite of cleansing by water was substituted.

14 See Chapter 9 (b).

bank.<sup>15</sup> On the day of *asti*<sup>16</sup> it is dug up and tied in a piece of silk cloth. It is then placed around the neck of the chief mourner, the *kirāthangba*, who takes it back to the house and puts it in a safe place until it can be taken to one of the Hindu sacred sites, such as Brindāban or Puri. The *kirāthangba* remains withdrawn until the time of the *śrāddha*, for the spirit of the deceased is supposed to be with him. He is supposed to carry a knife, to ward off the attentions of evil spirits. Today the taking of the frontal bone to Hindu sacred places is not so strictly observed, and it is often simply buried in the courtyard. This is possibly a revival of the pre-Hindu custom of burying the ancestors in the family plot.

The whole *sagei* is subject to dietary restrictions until the *śrāddha*, since they are not permitted to eat either fish or salt. Daily, until the *śrāddha* takes place, they must conduct a recital of sacred Hindu texts. The date of the *śrāddha* varies according to the caste of the deceased. For Brahmins it takes place on the eleventh day after death, for Kshatriyas two days later than this. The migrant population below this caste formerly held the *śrāddha* on the thirtieth day, but this has now been brought forward to the fifteenth day after death. The *śrāddha* is usually performed on as large a scale as possible, and includes a *kīrtan* and a feast for a large gathering of people. It must be continued as a monthly ritual for the first year after death. In this, food is first offered to the Hindu gods and then eaten by a few close relatives. On the first anniversary of the *śrāddha* a repetition of the ceremony takes place (the *samasōr*). This again takes place on a large scale and is accompanied by *kīrtans*. Food is offered to the Hindu gods before being consumed by the people present. Vegetarian food only is acceptable on this occasion.

This basic Hindu pattern admits of several interesting

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15 The Andro Loi carry back to the house all the bones which are not consumed and bury them in a pot to the south-west of the *phungga*.

16 *Asti* is usually the fifth day: for Brahmins it is the third day, for those who have become *sannyāsīs* it is the sixth day.

variations, which throw some light on the traditional Meitei death rites and in which the *māibas* are generally prominent. Suicides (*thouri yanduna siba*) were previously simply exposed in the jungle as being unfit for proper disposal. Children dying in infancy and women dying at childbirth called for special ceremonies to ward off the attentions of their potentially malignant spirits from the living.

The bodies of infants were buried in deep graves in an isolated spot. According to the account preserved by Higgins (n. d. 10-11) some roasted peanuts were buried with the body by the *māibi*, who enjoined the dead infant not to return until the peanuts were grown. The spirits of dead infants are believed to be malicious and are called *Soren*. It is therefore necessary for a ceremony, *lāiyupānthāba*,<sup>17</sup> to be performed to prevent the dead child returning and re-entering the mother's womb. Should this happen it is believed that her next child will die in similar manner.

A hand of bananas is taken and counted : it has to be of an odd number (*chang*), which represents the living. This is placed on the verandah of the house together with some betel nut and fruit, which are placed on a cloth (or, should the dead child have been a girl, a petticoat). The *māibi* then addresses the spirit in the following words :

‘We have now given you all this food and clothing ;  
be content ; go and do not return.’

The first part of the ceremony is now completed, and the offerings become the property of the *māibi*.

A second, and more important, ceremony follows after three months. Various articles have to be collected : an earthen pot, a duck's egg, rice flour, a *chang* bunch of bananas, two *si* bunches of bananas, betel leaf and nut, and six cloths on which the offerings are placed. These are all placed on a winnowing fan. A second group of offerings is then collected. These consist of : a handkerchief, a *chang* bunch of bananas,

<sup>17</sup> *Yu* is rice beer, and *yupānthāba* was originally the libation of a small amount of beer poured out to the spirits before drinking.



betel nut which has begun to sprout, one large and seven small betel leaves, a lime, betel nut and a candle of beeswax. After sunset the *māibī* faces the direction of Koubru, to the north, and prays to Guru Sidaba. Subsequently a portion of the offerings are set out for a malignant peripatetic spirit, *Lamjāsara Lathokpa*, who is implored not to trouble the family. Finally the real business of laying the spirit of the child begins. This is called *soren thingaatpa* ('laying the ghost'). For this the parents stand with the *māibī* in the north east corner of the *inkhōl*, again facing Mount Koubru. The *māibī* passes the winnowing fan containing the articles to the parents, who then hold it over their heads. While they are doing so the *māibī* addresses a prayer to Guru Sidaba requesting that the spirit will accept the offerings and not return to the family. A lime is then given to the parents, which represents the next child to be born to them. This is first wrapped and nursed, and then hidden secretly. The spirit is now appeased, but should some misfortune occur, which would lead the parents to suppose that the *soren* is still troubling them, then the whole ceremony must be carried out again, either at the expense of the parents or of the *sagei* as a whole.

A different ceremony is prescribed for mothers who die in childbirth, but with the similar purpose of removing the influence of spirit of the deceased from the living, in this case especially the husband. At this ritual a *māibā* sits in front of the verandah of the house and to his left, but at right angles to him, three cloths are set. On these a hand of bananas is set, and this is covered with three further cloths. This is meant to represent the body of the deceased. Mats are placed before the cloths, and behind each offerings of betel nut, and cups and pots containing rice and limes. Between these articles and the *māibā* is placed a pot of water. On the far side of the courtyard is placed a basket of paddy, another containing rice and behind them a stick of *nongleisang*. Finally five small discs of salt are suspended before the verandah. These are later discarded at the boundaries of the village, and are thought to give protection against evil influences. The actual ceremony begins

when a sister of the deceased woman brings offerings of flowers and a little rice. The *māibā* then dips a bunch of leaves in water and sprinkles this on the hearth. He and others take some of the earth from the hearth and place it on a leaf ; after walking around the hearth three times the earth is discarded, and fresh earth put in its place. The husband is himself then sprinkled by the *māibā*. The ceremony is now complete, and the offerings are taken by the *māibā*. In order to banish evil influences from the house for good the *māibā* must return to his house without looking back.

Rituals such as these give some indication as to the kind of eschatology believed in by the Meiteis before the advent of Hinduism. In fact there is still today a very strong belief in the traditional ideas concerning the dead. It is believed that after death the spirit washes its feet in *khōnghāmpat*, a piece of water north of Imphal, and then passes by the *Makhoinungong* hills.<sup>18</sup> From here they proceed to the *Numbal* stream, which they cross and reach a hill called *Thōngngāk*, where there is a shrine to the goddess of the place *Thōngngāk* *Lairembi*, who is supposed to guard the gates of the abode of the dead.<sup>19</sup> Here they refresh themselves with water which is placed in two gourds, a larger one for adults and a smaller for children. Thereafter they pass to the place of the dead. The shrine was previously in the custody of a *māiba* who would ensure that the gourds were kept well filled to assuage the thirst of the dead. That these beliefs still have influence, despite the advent of Hinduism, is seen in the practice of placing a thread and sometimes a small boat to be burnt with the body on the pyre, in order to assist them in crossing the river.

It will be seen from the above accounts that the rites of passage among the Manipuris retain certain elements of the traditional faith despite the complete acceptance of Hinduism

18 Both places have symbolic names : *Khōnghāmpat*=place of washing feet (*khong*=foot, *hāmba*=to wash) ; *Makhoinungong*=regret at the sorrow of separation.

19 *Thōng*=door, *ngākpa*=to guard.

and the sacraments of that religion. While traditional aspects are seen in minor matters, such as the coffin, thread and small boat at the funeral pyre, they are most clearly shown in the part played by the *māibās* and *māibīs*, and in the apotropaic rites which attend some of the rituals.

## CHAPTER VI

### AGRICULTURAL RITES

In common with most peoples which are basically agricultural the Manipuris engaged in cultivation and agricultural rites at certain seasons of the year. The most important of these are those connected with rice production and harvesting, and those associated with rain control. While these are becoming less common, with the increase in urbanization and the consequent passing of the more traditional ways, they are still carried out in the villages where the dependency of the people on the land is more marked.

#### (a) *Rice rituals.*

The presence of rice deities is well attested in Asia<sup>1</sup> where it is the staple crop. The rice deity is usually female, and to this Manipur is no exception. The Meitei rice goddess is *Phouoibi*.<sup>2</sup> She is not regarded as a *ūmāng lāi* so much as the spirit of the rice itself.

Ploughing must commence in Manipur on the Hindu festival of *Panchamī*, regardless of the condition of the ground. A small area only has to be ploughed at this time, and the Rājā was in former times obliged to carry out certain rites. Offerings were made to Phouibi consisting of fruit and vegetables at the four corners of a specially prepared piece of land (Shakespear 1913 : 446). It was then divided into three sections, in each of which a small amount of seed had to be sown.

The harvesting of the crop had to be accompanied by the appropriate rites. Shakespear records an elaborate ceremony in which a *māibā* invoked the goddess to increase the rice

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1 See e.g. Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1955 : 55-62) on Me Possop, the rice goddess of Thailand. Rice is also used as a fertility symbol in Indian rituals.

2 *phou*=the unhusked rice, paddy, *oibi*=the verb *oiba* (to become) with the feminine ending *i*.

yield (Shakespear 1913 : 446-8). The most important part of this invocation ran as follows :

‘By the *māibās*, the glorious heap of paddy becomes more beautiful. You from Meyang Khulen<sup>3</sup>, let it increase, let it grow up, let it grow long. On this day of calling all we your grandchildren, offer a black hen to you our Lady Phouoibi, addressing you as Loimonphau. What we leave of the cooked rice, let it not decrease but increase. What we leave of the zu, let it ferment again. O Lady ! make the paddy to increase on the threshing mat as the rivers fertilize the land.’

This passage is interesting in that it indicates that in pre-Hindu times the rice goddess was offered the sacrifice of a black hen and also of rice beer. This ceremonial was in Shakespear’s time seldom observed, and today it has been completely replaced by a less elaborate rite. The *māibā* today addresses the rice goddess according to the results of the previous harvest. If it has been a good one the following formula is used :

‘You gave us good crops last year : we pray you to give us good crops this year.’

If, on the other hand, the last year’s crop was a poor one a different formula is used :

‘The crop was not satisfactory last year : let it be satisfactory this year : let there be no insects.’

Some rice is then mixed with flowers, which are then placed on a banana leaf. This is then taken to the harvest field and the mixture thrown in the four directions by the man who is to cut the paddy.

After the harvesting and ingathering, but prior to the threshing Phouoibi is presented with certain offerings. A sheaf of paddy is placed on the ground facing northwards. On top of this is put a winnowing fan, then a whole banana leaf. These are then covered with a white cloth. On the cloth the following offerings are placed : a hand of *chang* bananas, a

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3 i.e. Cachar, where Phouoibi once fled.

betel leaf, fruit, flowers, sugar cane and some rice. These all should face south. Behind the offerings is suspended another cloth between two bamboo poles. The offerings are subsequently consumed by all those present.

After the threshing the ceremony of *phou-kōuba* (i.e. 'calling the rice') takes place. This may be done before the rice is placed into stores, although the full *phou-kōuba* ceremony is usually carried out only when some mishap occurs, such as the theft or burning of the paddy, or if a cow trespasses on to the threshing floor. It is believed that such mishaps cause the goddess to withdraw, and the rite is therefore carried out to induce her to remain. The most important offering in this case consists of the *sareng* fish, which must be cooked with herbs only (not spices) and is presented with rice.<sup>4</sup>

(b) *Rain rituals.*

Correct and seasonal rainfall is as essential to the ceremony of Manipur as to any other agricultural community. Several rites were evolved therefore which sought to control rainfall. The bulk of these were concerned with the production of rain during periods of prolonged drought. Several methods are referred to in the British accounts, some of which find confirmation from the *OK*.

The fullest account of a rain ceremony is given by Shakespeare (1913 : 453ff.), and is of a ceremony which was carried out at Nongmaijing hill. Legend has it that a certain woman, Nōngmai Chānu Seleima worshipped the *lāi* Sorāren and requested him to give her nine sons. Four were soon born to her, but were of stone instead of flesh and blood. She thereupon left her home with her stone children. Coming to the Iril River she discovered that it was impassable because of flooding. She left the stone children on the bank and managed to cross alone. The stones cried out at being abandoned and the place received the name *Nunḡlāobi* ('stone crying'). Five

4 Higgins (n.d. 31) records a ceremony which may be performed when caterpillars are particularly troublesome. It shows distinct traces of having been adopted from hill peoples : See Chapter 8 (c).

Other children were born to her, also of stone, and left in various places. The woman then asked Sorären how she should feed the children, and was answered that they would be fed on the offerings presented by those who would present food to the *lāi* in order to obtain rain. The mother and her first four stone children then went to a small cave on Nongmaijing Hill. According to Shakespear there are here five stones, the largest of which bears some resemblance to a human figure, but the smaller ones are simply stones taken from the bed of the river. These stones are regarded as sacred and must never be touched. The stones are in the custody of certain Angom *sageis* who appoint guardians, known as *nonglāmba*. These must not become ritually unclean at any time. When a rain ritual is to be performed they must abstain from contact with women for five days, and then go to the cave bathed and dressed in clean clothes. They are accompanied by other men who carry rain shields. A canopy is then erected over the *laiphām* and a cloth spread out, beneath which are two *sel* (coins of bell-metal), and two iron plates. On top of the cloth are placed the plants *langtereī* and *leisang* and five separate offerings, one for each stone figure. These consist of a *chang* bunch of bananas, betel leaves, lime, sugarcane and rice. The goddess is then invoked, The *nonglāmba* may then remove the stones. Up to three of the stone 'children' may be taken at any one time, but on no account must he remove all four, for this would anger the goddess. The stones must not be touched, and the *nonglāmba* therefore wraps them in cloths before removal. One stone is taken down to the river and immersed there, where it is left until rain falls. If no rain comes a second stone may be taken also, and then a third. After the rainfall the stones are returned to their places.

Another method of rain-making referred to by Shakespear involves the exchange of vile abuse known as *nonglāoba*, which has already been mentioned in connection with the Holi Festival. The use of *nonglāoba* here, as at Holi, stems from the use of obscenities in fertility rites. Its use in rain-making is probably more original in view of the etymology of the term

(*nong* = rain, *lāoba* = to call). In Shakespear's account *nong-lāoba* accompanied the ceremonial pouring of water on the *Yumjāo lairembi's* shrine in the palace, and the abuse was exchanged between the king, his wives and his servants. The use of *nonglāoba* in rain-making is confirmed by the *CK* although in this particular case the abuse was limited to the king and his father-in-law, the Angom Ningthou :

'In 1779 sak. (1857 A. D.) in the month of *Ingel* (June/July) on the 22nd day, Tuesday, because of the drought and the failure of seasonal rain, the king and the Angom Ningthou both rode in a boat and abused (*nonglāoba*) each other.' *CK* p. 333.

It will be noticed that in this case the shouting took place in a boat. It was thus combined with another traditional method of making rain in which the boats of the *rājā* were ceremonially raced on the river (Higgins n.d. 20). A reference in the *CK* suggests that it was a special boat which was used for this purpose :

'In 1792 sak. (1870 A. D.) in the month of *Thawān* (July/August) on the 6th day, Wednesday, the whole congregation of *māibās* begged blessing from the king to get rain and worshipped the *lāi* by opening the lock-gate where the sacred (i.e. having magical efficacy) boat was : the rain descended.' *CK* p. 391.

During the Hindu period offerings were also made to the Hindu gods to obtain rain. Thus we find examples of Govinda's image being exposed in the polo ground (*CK* for [1878 A. D.] p. 441, and for [1854 A. D.] p. 328), of *kirtans* being performed (*CK* for [1859 A. D.] p. 341), and of the milking of one hundred and eight cows (*CK* for [1878 A. D.] p. 441), all with the purpose of seeking rainfall. These methods were carried out in addition to the traditional methods of rain-making and did not replace them even in the twentieth century.



## ADDITIONAL NOTE ON THE *MĀIBĪS* AND *MĀIBĀS*

Frequent mention has been made in the preceding chapters of the *māibīs* and *māibās*, the traditional priestesses and priests of the old Meitei religion. Higgings (n.d. 97) regarded the original form as *amaibi*, and thought it was derived from the last syllables of Sanāmahi : McCulloch (1859 : 21) records an earlier belief according to which the *māibīs* were descended from a princess who lived in ancient times. These ideas are at best speculative. The meaning and origins of the *māibīs* are obscure. There can be little doubt, however, that the *māibīs* were connected with the *umang lāi*. It is also likely that the female *māibi* was earlier than her male counterpart. The *māibi* plays a more important role in the festivals, and, according to Shakespear (1913 : 429 ; 1910a : 354), the *lāi* is thought to take more pleasure in female ritual functionaries. Furthermore women are more likely to become possessed. More significantly, when a man becomes possessed by the *lāi* he will wear the clothes of the female *māibi*, and may be spoken of as a 'male *māibi*'.<sup>5</sup> There can be little doubt that the *māibi* was originally far more important than the *māibā*.

It seems clear that the *māibīs* were of genuinely Manipuri origin, or at least became assimilated into the Meitei social system at a very early date, for they are within the *sagei* system, and in no sense stand apart from Manipuri society in general. They are not a separate caste.

There are subdivisions within the *māibic* community. *Māibās* and *māibīs* who have priestly and ritual functions are distinct from those who are simply traditional physicians and midwives. The latter may also know the appropriate utterances and mantras, but do not dress in the distinctive white of the priestly *māibās* and *māibīs* and do not have their ritual functions. There are further distinctions within the priestly group. There are three groups, the Sanglen, Nongmāi and Fura respectively, each of which undertakes

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5 Compare Eliade (1964 : 257, 461)

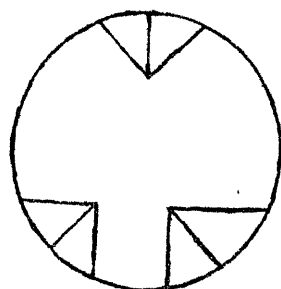
the rites of particular *yeks*. The Sanglen group officiates for the Ningthouja *yek*, the Fura group for the Khuman and Khāba-Ngānba *yeks*, and the Nongmai for the remainder.

The three groups also have distinct ways of offering the *langthrei* buds. There are also three forms of Sanāmahi and Leimaren for the three priestly groups. The coins representing these are of different patterns ( see diagram ).

A woman may become a *māibī* either by being chosen at the *Lāi Harāoba* or by being directly possessed by the *lāi*. In the case of the *māibā* the second only is the case. A girl may become possessed at an early age, as young as seven years. Such are usually thought to make the best *māibīs*. But older women may also become *māibīs*, even as late as fifty or sixty years of age. Possession leads to abnormal behaviour. The woman may sing, pull at her hair, and refuse food. At the festivals she may begin to dance in a wild manner and fall into a trance, in which state she will utter unintelligible sounds. *Māibīs* are thought to be possessed by a *lāi*, often one of the major gods such as Thāngjing, Mārjing or Wāngbaren, but equally it could be one of the lesser *lāi*. *Māibīs* may also be possessed by a goddess—Pānthoibi for example—although it is usually the *māibā* who is possessed by a female *lāi*.

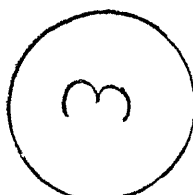
The married life of the *māibī* is complicated by her relationship to the *lāi* by whom she is possessed. Usually she sleeps on the the left side (outside) of the bed, the position normally occupied by the husband. Only when the husband himself is familiar with the formulae which concern the *lāi* (*lāiram-tillam*) may he sleep on the usual side. The *lāi* visits the *māibī* by night, on particular nights of the month when she has to sleep alone. On such occasions the *lāi* may approach her in human form, or in the form of an animal. Koubru takes the form of an elephant, Mārjing a horse and Sanāmahi a bull. The *māibī* will feel the actual sensation of copulation on these occasions. This is most satisfying when the *lāi* takes human form. Even with those *māibīs* who are possessed by a female *lāi* the satisfying feeling of sexual relations is felt. The *lāi* may also visit the *māibī* while she is menstruating, but no

Methods of offering *lāngthrei* and inscriptions on Ssanāmahi coins for the three groups of māibis :



Sanglen group  
( for Ningthouja  
yek only )

buds facing outwards

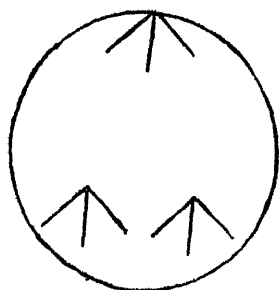


Sanāmahi



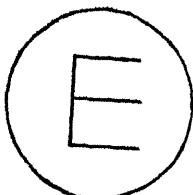
Leimaren

coins

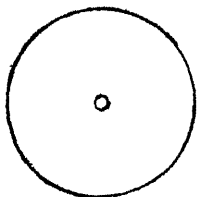


Fura group  
(for Khuman and  
Khāba-Ngānba  
yeks )

buds facing downwards

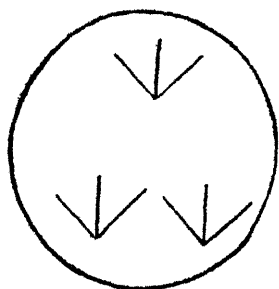


Sanāmahi



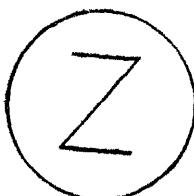
Leimaren

coins



Nongmāi group  
( for remaining  
yeks )

buds facing upwards



Sanāmahi



Leimaren

coins

sensation of intercourse occurs at such times. Should the *māibī* have intercourse with her human husband on an occasion while the *lāi* visits her, the husband will often realize this and leave her. Should a *māibī* bear a child by her husband the *lāi* is likely to become angry. The *māibī* will then lose natural affection for the child and sometimes illtreat and neglect it. In such circumstances it would seem better not to marry, although in point of fact many *māibīs* do so.

The *lāi* possesses the *māibī* also while she is awake, causing her to lose her awareness of where she is, and to walk without knowing where she is going. When the *lāi* leaves her she will then inquire and find her way back. The *lāi* remains in the *māibī* in the form of a snake or a lump or ball (*matum*) within the stomach. This is termed *lāi tongba* (*lāi* sitting on them). Should the *māibī* become angry the sensations become more acute. To relieve this sensation a special kind of massaging is carried out (called *puk shuba*).

*Māibās* and *māibīs* are also subjected to certain ritual restrictions. They are not permitted to eat together with those who are not *māibīs*, and are forbidden certain types of 'unclean' food. One example of the latter is the kind of fish which have long 'whiskers'. They must also preserve rules of ritual cleanliness by avoiding touching those who are in an unclean state through menstruation, childbirth and so on. Certain kinds of reeds and grasses may not be used in their fires, such as the white lemon grass.

The dress of the *māibī* is distinctive. The *phanek* (skirt) and *inaphi* (shawl) are all of white, and an additional waist wrapper, also of white and half length, is worn on top of the *phanek*. Often a longsleeved white blouse is worn, and flowers may be placed in the hair and behind the ears. The male *māibā* will dress in a similar way, with a long white jacket and white sash wrapped around the waist. A white turban will also be worn.

Besides the ritual functions a *māibī* may also act as a kind of fortune-teller. Oracles of this kind are done with the aid of two sets of *senkhai* (half-sel), one set for the *lāiningthou*

and another for the *lāirema*. These are cast and the oracle read from the inscriptions on the sides of the coins which are uppermost. Another function of the *māibā* is to call back the five souls and the shadow of seriously ill persons in order that they may recover. This is called *thawai mi kouba* (calling back the soul and shadow). This may be done also by the non-cultic *māibā*, who also practises other methods of healing such as the use of massages and herbal medicines. *Māibīs* act as mediums, communicating with the dead and passing on their messages to living relatives. In cases where children die in infancy the *māibī* may perform *thoutouba* (appeasement) ceremonies to prevent the next child dying in a similar way.

## PART III : THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MANIPURI RELIGION

### CHAPTER VII

#### THE EARLY PERIOD

In the preceding part of this book an attempt has been made to describe the phenomena of Meitei pre-Hindu religion, insofar as these may be reconstructed both from present beliefs and practices and from such sources as are available to us in archaic Manipuri. Our present task is to consider what evidence we have of the processes of Hinduization in Manipur and what were the factors which brought about this change in religion. We further need to ask how far Hinduism, especially in the aspect of Vaishnavism of the Chaitanya school, has developed upon a substratum of ancient religion.

In such historical reconstruction the problem of the historicity of our sources becomes more acute. The special problem of the main literary source, the *Oheithārol Kumbābā*, has been considered in the Introduction. In what follows its substantial reliability for the later history of Manipur will be assumed, and the often enigmatic and cryptic utterances of the earlier part will be treated as the raw material from which actual historical data may plausibly be extracted. Other sources supplement the Chronicle. We have already mentioned the *Ningthoural Lambuba*, which contains a wealth of aetiological legends which, although cast in a somewhat amorphous framework, nevertheless shed some light on pre-Hindu times. It is from this source, for example, that we learn of the primitive Meitei belief that man was both soul and body (*NL* 191), and that cremation was customary, at least in some circles (*NL* 234).

#### (a) *Brahmin Migrations*

A further source, which throws light on Brahmin influences in Manipur, is the brief manuscript *Bāmon Khunthok* ('The Migrations of the Brahmins'). This is in effect a list of the various settlements of Brahmins in Manipur, giving the names

of those concerned and the dates and reigns of the settlements.<sup>1</sup> According to the *BK* the earliest Brahmin settlements were in the reign of Kyāmba in the 15th Century,<sup>2</sup> and these continued periodically from then on. Such Brahmin migrations would not, of course, in any sense demonstrate that Brahmanical Hinduism as such had any great hold among the Meiteis at this early period—the *BK* tells us nothing of the character of these Brahmins or how zealous they were in seeking to establish their own particular religious authority over the indigenous population. That some attempt was made to challenge the ancient faith cannot reasonably be doubted; but without the support of the ruling authority—a support which was not fully realized until the time of Garīb Niwāz, and then not without local opposition—there is no reason to believe that Brahmanical Hinduism made any significant headway.

#### (b) *Cultural Contact*

A different approach to the question of early Hindu influence may be made through the contact which the early Meiteis had with neighbouring Hindu peoples. But here the *CK* is of little help. Early Meitei history was largely concerned with inter-tribal warfare and the struggle of the Ningthoujā clan to establish its supremacy over its rivals. The wars described in the earlier pages of the *Chronicle* therefore concern the *yeks* and the smaller tribes in the immediate vicinity of the Valley: this suggests that influences from the larger Indian sub-continent were negligible.<sup>3</sup>

These facts dispose us to treat with some reserve the

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1 The *B.K.* was available to me in MS form only, and in the modern rendering of Kolachandra Singh. As far as I know it has not been published.

2 The *CK* agrees with this.

3 The Luwāngs appear as a separate entity until at least 949 A.D.; we still hear of battles between the Ningthoujās and the Khumans around 1200; the Angom kingdom was still independent in 1326 and the Moirāngs were still powerful as late as 1354. In such a state of affairs we can expect that early Manipuri history was not outward looking.

account contained in the brief text *Chingurembi Khonglup* ('The Companions of Chingurembi'), which claims Hindu influence as early as the second half of the seventh century. According to this text the Meitei king Nāothingkhong (who ascended the throne in 663 A.D. according to the *OK*) married a princess from the west. The name given to her by the text, Chingurembi, is a Manipuri one.<sup>4</sup> She is described as a western princess (*mayang leima*). The text goes on to list certain persons who are said to have been in her entourage. Most of these appear, from the names given to them, to have been Hindus of the two lower castes. The full list is as follows :

1. a personal attendant, Lakhi Naral ( i. e. Lakshmi Nārāyaṇ)
2. an attendant, Ram Naral (Rām Nārāyaṇ)
3. a howdah-carrier, Lokhon Das (Lakshman Das)
4. an elephant driver, Tulasī Rām.
5. a dyer, Tulasī Rām
6. a goldsmith, Hari
7. a groom, Hari Naral (Hari Nārāyaṇ)
8. an attendant, Tapa
9. a cowherd, Akhul Tao
10. a fisherman, Kathou (Jhalajit Singh 1965 : 50)

The last three names tell us nothing either of the ethnic extraction or the religious commitment of the persons concerned. Tulasī Ram, a name borne by two of the companions, and Hari denote a familiarity with Vaishṇavite faith. The names of the remaining persons could also be construed as indicating a Hindu background. The prevalence of the names of the deities Lakshmi and Nārāyaṇ may be noted as further evidence of Vaishṇavite influence.

On the basis of this text Jhalajit Singh has argued that cultural contact was established between Manipur and India proper at an early date (1965 : 50) and that religious, specifically Vaishṇavite, influences had percolated through to Manipur as early as the 7th century. However the date and

4 Chingurembi = *chingu*—fortune, *rembi*—fem. ending.



accuracy of the *Chingurembi Khonglop* have yet to be established, and it is very doubtful, in the absence of confirmatory evidence from other sources, that the claim to such ancient Vaishṇavite influence can be accepted. It would seem safer to regard the *Chingurembi Khonglop* as a religious tract, emanating from a period when Vaishṇavism was already established in Manipur, written with the object of trying to establish an early date for its introduction. It is possible that it reflects a time when the Vaishṇavite religion was under pressure from a rival faith, perhaps from Śaivism.

(c) *The Phayeng Copper Plate*

A generation ago an enthusiastic and erudite amateur archaeologist, W. Yumjao Singh, made, under the patronage of the Raja and the British Political Agents, a series of ambitious excavations in an attempt to uncover information about ancient Manipur. It is fortunate that his discoveries were put into print before the ravages of the Second World War reached Manipur. They were published in 1935 as *Report on Archaeological Studies in Manipur, Bulletin No .1.*<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most fascinating of all Yumjao's discoveries consisted of seven sheets of copper plate, which, together with some other fragments, were purchased from the Loi village of Phayeng. Unhappily the copper plates themselves are not available for examination: their present whereabouts are unknown—possibly having been lost during the war, possibly awaiting the appearance of the highest bidder. Their existence however is certain and well attested. Fortunately Yumjao recorded the contents of the plates in full in his *Archaeological Report*, as well as making some illuminating comments on them. The writing is in archaic Manipuri, and in view of their importance for the evidence of Śaivism in Manipur the translation, as given by Yumjao, is given in full below:

<sup>5</sup> I am greatly indebted to Professor Gordon Luce for kindly giving me his copy of this monograph: the only other copy I have seen is in the archives in Imphal.

'Shri Hari, in the year 721, Shok King Khongteckcha, after his accession to the throne obtained an ancient manuscript through the grace of god as a reward of his devotedness to him.

'This is the order of King Khongtekcha Yoirenba and let it be known : I, the king, according to the injunctions of this manuscript worshipped Śiva and Durgā for a long time and through their grace received a stone that would make a man immortal and not liable to diseases. If any one opens this book untimely let him die by vomiting blood, and be killed by thunderbolt leaving no descendant and let all his clan be killed by the sword.

'This is my further injunction that if anyone gets this book and conceals it for himself without informing the king and queen of the land the above curse will certainly befall him. On the eve of opening this book a ceremony is to be performed by offering three mud fishes, sweetmeats, 7 leaves of the sacred peepul tree, 7 leaves of emblic myrobalam tree and 7 sprouts of the *Hunurei* tree ( a kind of croton ) at the dead of night and there must not be present a second person. If such a puja is performed the man will get his wishes. The formula for this worship is : *i, i, i, soha, soha*. This book will be out in the year 1792. O mortal know it for certain.

'Let me predict another thing by bowing down to Shiva, the king who gets the grace of Shiva and Durgā will obtain this book.

'Now let me also predict another thing : in the year 1790 there will be a great calamity in the land when Hari will go to heaven. At this the god Gaṇesha, knowing beforehand the doom of the country, will incarnate himself with the 363 gods as man in order to save the land. He will distribute handfuls of gold and silver. Even in the iron age itself he will distinctly see Shiva and Durgā, who would favour him. Let me predict another thing ; of the 89 kings one will marry Durgā, when she will incarnate as a human being, and the god Indra will be born of her, as king who with his spiritual guide

and the human incarnation of the gods will reign in the kingdom. Let it also be known that he will appoint divine officials and the nine gods will also be appointed his officials. He will wear the nine storied umbrella, and have golden and silver swords made. The doolie that will be made for him will be called "Puspamahamanik" and after this the white elephant will come. All the 89 kings will pay tribute to him, man must know this for certain. One of these kings who knows the merit of the spiritual guide will give his daughter in marriage to him and all the 89 kings will have to worship him. You must know that it is not what I say of my own accord but it is an injunction of Shiva and thus can never fail.

'And this king, on account of his devotedness to Shiva, Durgā and Gaṇeṣha will get the Dharma of *rasāyana* (alchemy). Those who worship Shiva, Durgā and Gaṇeṣha will get what has been said above. If the king worships according to the injunctions of this book he will get the medicines known as *La, Kou, Pram*.

'Let me also say another thing ; this book will be obtained by a man who is an incarnation of the god Vishwakarma.

'O man, you must know for certain that it is not my prediction but it is the injunction of Shiva. Let me reveal another thing ; the formula to appease Shiva is *Om shring, Khoga asirma ring soha*. This formula will have to be muttered for 12 months. The necessary ingredients for this puja are 12 leaves of Bengal quince, 12 flowers of nux-vomica, milk from red, black and white cows, rice (uncooked), seasamum, incense and candles. This formula can also be used for the worship of Devī (Durgā). One who recites this formula will never be killed by the sword, the spear, fire, water and wind, but will get his wishes fulfilled.

'Let me say another thing too : if you wish to worship Shiva, Durgā and Gaṇeṣha do it with the above formula. You will get them. The king who obtains this spiritual guide first of all is a fortunate king who on account of his devotedness to him will live for 1000 years. This king will go to heaven with the spiritual guide ; they will first have to go to the feet of

Shiva and Durgā and then become the servant of Hari. Then they will not have rebirth. This is my, the king's order, that this manuscript, if I be the servant of Shiva, never perish. If the king worships the god with a firm belief, Devī will reward him with three medicines, namely *La*, *Kou*, *Pram*. You must remember that this is my, the king's, prediction.'

The plates relate to the time of King Khongtekchia, who reigned, according to the *CK*, from AD 763-784. While they claim to be a verbatim account of the king's injunction encouraging the worship of Śiva and Durgā, they do not explicitly claim to have been written in his actual reign. There is no *a priori* reason why the plates could not date from this period, as there is evidence for copper plate writing from earlier than the 8th century in neighbouring Assam.<sup>6</sup> However internal evidence from the Phayeng plates themselves makes this most unlikely. Yumjao, who seems to have been the only person competent in archaic Manipuri to have examined the plates, concluded from the shaping of the characters and from the language that it cannot 'positively be asserted that the plates are much older than a century' (1935: 13). To judge by the transliteration given by Yumjao the language is indeed very modern, and the slight inflections may most conveniently be explained as examples of Loi dialect. The presence of non-Manipuri and Sanskrit words (*purān*, *bichati*, *soha*, *om* and so on) would tend to support a late date. Yumjao's conjecture that the plates are not more than a century old would give an earliest date for their composition as around AD 1830. This dating cannot, of course, be proved with any degree of certainty until the plates are brought to light and subjected to scientific examination. There are however certain other features about the plates which would point to a dating of about 1800 or somewhat earlier. It should be noted that dating given in the plates 'in

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6 R. K. L. Barua (1965: ii—iii) gives details of several Assamese copper plate inscriptions; one, the Nidhanpur copper plate of Bhāskaravarṃa Deva dates from 610 AD.

the year 721 sak (799 AD). Shok King Khongtekcha after his accession to the throne...’ is incorrect. According to the *Chronicle* Khontekcha reigned from 763-773 A.D.<sup>7</sup> The writing of the plates must have taken place some long time after the the reign of Khongtekcha for such a considerable error in dating to have been made. A further evidence of late dating is indicated by the references to the ceremonial accompaniments of kingship to be enjoyed by the incarnation of Ganesha as king. There is little evidence of such royal splendour such as envisaged in the plates until the reign of Khagamba in the 15th century. It was not until his time that it was customary to address the king as *lāiningthou* i. e. ‘god-king’, a title here used of Khongtekcha.<sup>8</sup> It was in his reign too that the use of the palanquin was introduced,<sup>9</sup> an aspect of ritual which is also mentioned in the plates. The mention of the many storied umbrella, the gold and silver swords, and the riding on the white elephant all point to a time when the ceremonial of kingship was well established. This would necessarily be not earlier than the 15th century.

A clue to dating the plates may be found in the dates mentioned in the plates themselves. They claim that ‘the book will be out<sup>10</sup> in the year 1792.’ They further predict that there will be a great calamity in the year 1790, upon which Ganesha will incarnate himself to deliver the land. Translating these dates into the Christian Era, the revealing of the book and the great calamity should have taken place around 1870 and 1868. This brings us to the time of Raja Chandra Kirti, whose reign, it is true, was marked by numerous attempts on the throne and a certain amount of political unrest. But there does not appear to have been any event during his reign

7 Khongtekcha died in 773 A. D. According to the *CK* there was an interregnum from 774 until 784 when Keirencha, the son of Khongtekcha ascended the throne. He died in 779 and was succeeded in that same year by his son Yaraba. In 779 therefore Keirencha and Yaraba were kings.

8 *CK* p. 23.

9 ‘In 1527 Sak. (1605 AD.) King Khagamba began to ride in a palanquin from this time onwards.’ *CK* p. 21.

10 *phaolakatapati* and *phaolakatane* a dialectical form of *phāolakadā-bani* from *phaoba* meaning ‘will be revealed, will be famous’.

of such catastrophic proportions to fit the description given in the plates. We must assume therefore that the plates are not a prophecy *post eventum*: the date of composition must have been prior to 1868. We can perhaps hazard the conjecture that the plates emanate from the troubled period between the time of Chandra Kīrti's minority and 1868, and were probably written to support the divine kingship of one of the several claimants to the throne during this troubled period.

The aim of the plates is two-fold. It is primarily to gain support for the god-king Gaṇeśha, to whom the eighty-nine kings will pay tribute. It also however, has all the appearance of being a piece of religious propaganda to encourage the worship of Śiva and Durgā. The worship of these deities has ancient royal sanction and brings benefits especially connected with physical health and protection.<sup>11</sup> Possibly the aim of the plates is to gain royal patronage for the worship of Śiva and Durgā. If this is the case we shall probably be safe in assuming that they originate from a period when Śaivism was at a low ebb and in need of a boost—perhaps having been eclipsed by Vaishṇavism—and was lacking in royal support.

The Phayeng plates then tell us nothing about 8th century Meitei religion. They are however extremely valuable evidence for the presence of Śaivism in Manipur. While the dating of such apocalyptic material is very difficult we shall probably not be far wrong if we take the plates as evidence of an attempt to resuscitate Śaivism at some time during the first half of the 19th century.<sup>12</sup>

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11 'I, the king, according to the injunctions of this manuscript worshipped Śiva and Durgā for a long time...'

12 'Through their grace I received a stone that would make a man immortal and not liable to disease.' 'One who recites this formula (to Durgā) will never be killed by the sword, the spear, fire, water and wind but will get his wishes fulfilled.' 'If, the king worships the god with a firm belief, Devi will reward him with the three medicines.' On Śiva stones see below.

12 On the concrete evidence for Śaivism in Manipur see below.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PRE-HINDU PERIOD

The period from the accession of Kyamba to the death of Pāikhomba (1467 to 1698 A. D.) forms a kind of middle period in Manipuri history. With Kyamba a new phase in Meitei history comes into being. We are no longer dependent to the same extent upon the enigmatic phrases of the *CK* from this time on; its descriptions are fuller and the material is more detailed. During this period we have a number of references to the influences of Hinduism, but they are slight and, taken as a whole, were apparently ineffective in seducing the Meitei from their indigenous faith. There was certainly no royal sanction for Hinduism such as we find from the time of Charai Rongba. It may therefore be fittingly described as the pre-Hindu period.

We shall attempt to deal with this era in the development of Manipuri religion in two stages. Firstly we shall examine those traces of the ancient faith for which we have evidence; secondly we shall isolate those allusions to specifically Hindu concepts and rituals which occur in the *CK* and elsewhere.

#### (a) *Tree-Cults*

We have discussed above, in the first section of this book, the significance of the term *umang lāi* (forest or wood deity), and the way in which it is used as a general term for the traditional gods of the Meiteis, whether or not they have any clear connection with the forest. Often, as we have noted, the original connection of the *lāi* with trees has been forgotten and they are associated either with particular areas (as the 'guardians of the direction') or with other aspects of the religious life. In many cases deities termed *umang lāi* quite clearly have no connection with trees at all.<sup>1</sup> The term *umang lāi* therefore, while it may have originally been applied specifically to those *lāi* which were associated with trees or forests, quite early in the religious hist-

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<sup>1</sup> Sanāmahi and Leimaren, for example, are often now spoken of as *umang lāi*, although neither have any kind of association with trees.

ory of the Meiteis came to be a much more general term applied to any traditional deity.

Tradition has it that there were 365 *umang lāi* including those associated with families, with *yeks* and with the community as a whole. In an interesting note on *Vestiges of Tree Worship among the Meitei* (1964) K. B. Singh points out that among the *loi* tree worship may still be seen. For them the most sacred tree is the *tāiren* (cedrela toona). Worship of this tree consists of bowing and sometimes offerings of fruit and flowers. According to Singh the *Loi* regard the tree as an actual *lāi*, although it may perhaps be more plausibly suggested that the *tāiren* is thought to be either the symbol or the abode of spirit. The *tāiren* is still used by the *māibā* for cultic purposes, and it may well be that in this aspect of the cult the *Loi* have preserved an original Meitei pre-Hindu ritual. A branch of *tāiren* is waved by the *māibā* during his incantations for the exorcising of evil spirits,<sup>2</sup> and such branches also play a significant part in the *Lāi Harāoba*. Where a person has contracted an infectious disease, such as small pox or measles, a branch of the *tāiren* is hung on the door of the house as a warning to others. During the ritual bath after recovery from the illness a *tāiren* branch is dipped in water and sprinkled upon the person. A very similar practice occurs during the rite of *yumsengba*, cleansing after childbirth. Here also *tāiren* is used. The religious significance of this particular plant then is sufficiently well documented.

Tree reverence is a fairly common feature of many religions.<sup>3</sup> In the areas immediately surrounding Manipur we have a good deal of evidence for the importance of trees. R. K. L. Barua for example, notes that according to the biographers of the Vaishṇavite saint Saṅkara Deva, whose reformation swept through Assam during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the pre-Hindu inhabitants of Kāmarūpa were worshippers (among

2 Shakespear (1913 : 452) notes the similar use of the shrub *uhal*. In the rite of exorcism the bewitched person's clothes are placed on a branch of this shrub, and the *māibā* offers pan and betel nut.

3 It was common in Semitic religions, where it often had connection with fertility rites. There are also a number of European customs which can be traced back to tree worship. See HERE vol. 12.



other things) or trees, The whole of Barua's description is instructive in illustrating a number of points of similarity with the traditional Meitei religion :

'they were, it is stated by Dwija Ramananda, one of the biographers of Śri Sankara Deva, worshippers of demons *Bhairabs*, the trees, shades and stones. It is stated that goats, buffaloes, tortoises and pigeons were sacrificed in order to propitiate these deities, but no mention is made of human sacrifices.'

Further possible evidence of early tree-cults in the region is to be found in the strange heretical priests known as Aris, probably from *aran* or Sanskrit *aranya* 'forest'. These were widespread in Burma and may have been degraded Buddhists ; certainly they borrowed some Buddhist practices of an extreme śākta type. Among their cultic practices were the worship of the serpent and blood (including human) sacrifice (Eliot 1954 III : 53-4).

A similar phenomenon, rather closer to our area, is described in Spiro's *Burmese Supernaturalism*. The *nats* of Upper Burma are often associated with objects of nature and in particular with trees. Spiro's informants seem to have been unclear whether the names of the *nats* were to be applied to individual trees or whether they were generic or category terms—or indeed whether they were to be applied to individual trees or whole forests. The basic concept associated with *nats* however was one of fear<sup>4</sup> : they are regarded as guardians of a particular area and take vengeance on those who do not properly acknowledge their domain. They therefore need to be placated by offerings, which are usually pickled betel leaves and cooked rice. Spiro regards the belief in *nats* as derived from the Hindu concept of the tree-spirit. Here there are points of similarity with the Meitei concept of *umang lāi*. These were, like the *nats*, often guardians of localities, and like them apparently also received offerings of food. There does not appear to have been the same degree of fear felt for the *umang lāi* as for the *nats* however.

<sup>4</sup> Tambiah (1970 : 48) indeed equates the *nats* with the Hindu *āsuras*, demons who oppose the gods.

Before leaving the comparative evidence for tree cults we give a very early account of the cult in a Naga village by the Ningthee river. This is instructive in indicating that the Meitei *u khurumba* had partial parallels among certain hill tribes. The passage deserves to be quoted in full :

'The head man of the village told me, with a very serious face that he was fearful the 'Lae' was displeased in consequence of some omission of the proper respect and attention due to him...but he hoped to be able to appease him by the proper offerings ; which he proceeded forthwith to prepare in the shape of some best rice and vegetables procurable, cooked with great care and many prayers. The mess when ready he placed under a banyan tree on the outside of the village. If the 'Lae' partook of it within the two succeeding days, it would be a sure sign that his anger had evaporated.' (Grant 1834 : 132-3)

This account is interesting not only in showing that *lāi* was a word familiar to non-Meitei tribes, but also for the description of the offerings of appeasement to him. The *lāi* evidently was closely connected with the tree beneath which the offerings were placed, and we may well have here a clue to the kind of ritual which the Meiteis themselves used in the tree cult.

There are numerous references in the *CK* which show that tree reverence was very common during the pre-Hindu period. In the century or so between the years 1576 and 1665 there are no fewer than twelve explicit references in the *Chronicle* to tree dedication. Unfortunately these allusions are so cryptic that few safe conclusions can be drawn from them. The wording is usually stereotyped :

'In (the year) (name) dedicated a tree (*u hongba*). We may make two comments on the basis of these texts. Firstly the word *hongba* implies initiation or inauguration—the tree was made sacred for the first time.<sup>5</sup> In modern times it may be noted that the word is used for the dedication of a tank before it is used for obtaining water (*pukri hongba*). The words

<sup>5</sup> The same word is used of dedicating a was trench (1569 A. D.) and a field (1596 A. D.): note both are during the same period.

imply therefore a once for all first time dedication. Secondly, it is invariably the case that the person performing the dedication is either of royal blood or else of some importance. Often they are dedicated by women of the royal house ; on three occasions (1580 A. D. Kyamba, 1612 A. D. Khāgamba, 1659 A. D. Khunjāoba) it is the king himself. Elsewhere the officiant is the head of the locality, or a court official (the *hanjaba*).

There is no indication of the *lāi* to whom the trees were dedicated (if any), or whether the tree was thought to be associated with a particular known deity. Nor is there any clue as to the ceremonial followed, although *hongba* probably excludes animal sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> That tree reverence was ancient and, in certain circles, fairly common in ancient Manipur can hardly be doubted. It does not seem possible however on the basis of our present knowledge of the matter to understand its precise significance. But there can be little doubt that the practice of *u hongba* points back to a period when the *umang lāi* were really associated with *u*, long before the time when the term became a general one for all traditional deities. The practice of tree worship seems to have been given up a long time ago, as my field inquiries were unable to elicit any further information, save that in former times, when a tree was dedicated, a cloth was tied around it : possibly this was regarded (on analogy with Shakespear's account of the incident at Santhong) either as the clothes of the *lāi* or as the receptacle for the clothes.

#### (b) *Sacred Stones*

In view of the importance of stone inscriptions for the later period of Manipuri history it is perhaps surprising that there is only one isolated reference in the *OK* to the erection

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6 There are isolated references to clothing of sacred trees in other areas. In the temple of Isis, for example, the tree stump which represented the dead body of Osiris was wrapped in clothes and anointed ; the account of the reformation of the Judean King Josiah also contains a reference to the garments woven by the cult prostitutes for Asherah, (the pillar representing the female fertility principle) (1 Kings 23. 7).

of stones during this period. This occurs during the reign of Chalāmba :

'In the year 1480 sak. (1558 A. D.), the year of Taba Nganglaba,<sup>7</sup> a stone for the market was dragged by Khunja and another by Naicha ;<sup>8</sup> the name of the one stone was Charaiba, and that of the other Namsha : the stones were from Oinam' (p. 15).

The last phrase indicates that the stones originated from the village of Oinam, which is famous for stones of this kind. There is no indication in the text of the significance of the stones, but in the light of the evidence given below we surmise that it might well have been cultic. One such stone, oblong and about five feet in height, quite probably one of the original Chalamba stones, was still standing in the market place at Imphal before the second world war.<sup>9</sup>

The cultic significance of stones among the early Meiteis is proved by several sources. According to Shakespear the Moirāng cultic hero Yāosurākpa was transformed into a stone. Also in Moirāng, Khamba is said to have tied a buffalo to a stone before sacrificing it to Thāngjing. A flat stone there also marks the place where, according to tradition, the afterbirth of Thāngjing's son *Tampak Lāi Ningthou* was buried. Both of these stones are situated in the *lāiphām* of Thāngjing, where the annual *lāi harāoba* is held (Higgins n. d. p. 28). A burial place within the Kangla area was also marked by a stone ; here a *hingchābi* was said to have been buried alive. It was given the name *luphounung*<sup>10</sup> on account, it is said, of the fact that the frontal bone of every raja was placed there for five days after cremation (Higgins n. d. 29).

7 The Cheithaba.

8 Khunja and Naicha indicate two *pairs of panas*.

9 The other stone had an eventful history. It was removed in 1729 A. D. by Garīb Niwāz, who had it made into an image of Hanumān, which was then placed in the Hanumān temple. Nara Singh apparently removed this and returned the stone to its original place in the *lāiphām* of Nongsābā in 1847 A. D. Seven years later it was taken back to the market place. The reason for its disappearance is not known.

10 *lu* = head, *phouba* = to dry.

The religious significance of stones, even at a much later date, is supported by Shakespear's eye-witness account of the ceremonial in the grove of Santhong, near Moirāng (1913 435ff., also Higgins n. d. 32ff). From this account it would appear that a stone erected in the *lāiphām* of the god had got out of perpendicular, revealing an iron plate which had previously been buried at the *lāiphām* of Kachamba.<sup>11</sup> The stones were said to have been erected by King Khāgamba on the advice of his preceptor, to assure himself of prosperity and a long reign. The practice of erecting a reign-stone was followed by the five succeeding rājās, each of whom buried a gold cup beneath the stone. According to Shakespear :

'The stones are held to be closely connected with those who erect them, so that any accident happening to the living raja's stone is thought to portend some evil happening to him personally.' (1913 : 436)

The ceremony which Shakespear describes includes a case of seeking a good omen by casting gold and silver discs on a banana leaf, the positioning of the discs indicating good or evil fortune. The practice of placing an iron plate beneath the stone is thought to have been to ward off evil influences. It is significant that on this occasion a sacrifice of a pig was made. The actual slaughtering was done, not by the Manipuri Hindus, but by non-Hindu men of the Tikhup clan, who were also allowed to consume the meat. There can be little doubt that we have here a survival from an earlier pre-Hindu period when animal sacrifice was performed by the Meitei themselves.<sup>12</sup> A cloth subsequently buried beneath the stone had previously contained the clothes of the god Santhong and his wife (1913 : 437-8). Probably the idea here is that objects which had come so closely in contact with the god were impregnated with his power and therefore effectual in protecting the rājā's stone from demonic influences.

It is clear that in these cases we have to do with

11 One of the forms assumed by Wāngpurel, god of the south.

12 On sacrifices see further below, (c).

something more than mere commemorative stones.<sup>13</sup> From the evidence it may be suggested that in earlier times stones were used as sacrificial altars by the Meitei. The animals killed out of sight by non-Manipuris during the later period would probably have been sacrificed on the stone in earlier times. This conjecture is supported by the instance of Khamba's sacrifice of the bull noted above. Possibly also there is here some idea of ritual substitution: the evil is transferred from the rājā to the victim. This at any rate seems a more likely explanation than to regard the stone as protecting the person by whom it was erected. This was certainly the significance of smaller stones which could be carried on the person (Crooke 1906: 288) but it is somewhat difficult to transfer this to larger stone pillars.

References to stones of the small protective type do occur. Yumjao Singh (1935: 71-75) had in his possession an MS called the *Shagokshading*, which appears to have been a sort of almanac of buried treasure. Although it probably dates from the time of Charai Rongba it may be assumed that the cultic objects referred to in it are considerably earlier, and that it reflects the religious beliefs of an earlier time. In it several stones are listed, which are claimed to have supernatural power. One such is said to have been given to king Khunjāoba (AD 1652-1666) by the *Luwāng guru* (presumably *māibā*). Both this and others mentioned in Yumjao's list (nos. 20, 21) are described as 'precious', although whether we are to understand by this that jewels (rubies?) are meant is not clear.<sup>14</sup> Other stones listed are said to have been buried with manuscripts (items 27, 28, 37), by which we are perhaps meant to

13 Although it is evident that commemorative stones were common in Manipur (see Higgins n. d. 52-3; Yumjao 1935: 65-69; Shakespear 1913: 438).

14 Hodson (1910: 102) mentions an ammonite which was thought to be sacred, and was believed to bring good fortune to its possessor. He records the eagerness of the rājā to possess it, which eventually led to a court case over legitimate ownership. This, however, need not imply a survival of pre-Hindu Meitei religion, since the ammonite, known as *Sālagrāma*, is a well known emblem of Vishṇu.

understand copies of the mantras which made the stones efficacious. Whatever the precise significance of the stones in question it is evident that until quite recent times such magical stones had an important place in Manipur, and it may be assumed that they display one aspect of a fairly widespread belief in magic. Four stones listed in the *Shagokshading* are of special interest since they are explicitly connected with deities.

- a) At Nungjengmacha there is the tongue of Pākhangbā transformed into a stone having supernatural power.
- b) At the Khoibaching there is the god Nongshāba in the shape of a round stone. It is for the king only. The sages will excavate it. It is at a depth of 6 cubits.
- c) At Thayonglok there is a stone conch of Mahadev. Its spot is at the ascent of the Khangba Ching (Hill).
- d) In the Chinga Hill there is a precious stone with the sun and the moon on the top and underneath it. There is also a manuscript of the genealogy of the 5 Gurus.'

The shape of the first of these evidently suggested the tongue of the deity. Such interpretations of natural phenomena are common in the history of religions, not least in India (Crooke 1906 : 315). If the existence of sacrificial stones in Manipur be accepted the place of the 'tongue' of Pākhangbā would fit in well with this. The second stone evidently symbolized the deity. This was not uncommon among the Manipuris.<sup>15</sup> The fourth stone listed here probably falls into the same category. We have seen that the sun and moon played a part in Meitei religion. Further the stone creatures which, prior to 1891, guarded the Kangla, also symbolized the solar deity (Hodson 1910 : 102). We may surmise therefore that the engravings-

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15 It is referred to by Hodson (1910 : 102) although he is confused over the exact relationship between the stone and the *lāi*. I can find no evidence to support his contention that the Chronicles (here the *NL*) describe the worship of stones : stones were used as the symbol of god only.

of sun and moon were representations of the celestial deities.<sup>16</sup>

There remains the stone conch of Mahadeva situated at Khangba Hill.<sup>17</sup> Assuming Yumjao's dating of MS correct<sup>18</sup> we have here firm evidence that Śiva worship was developed in Manipur by the time of Charai Rongba (1697-1709). There is further evidence to support this contention (see below).

(c) *Blood Sacrifice*

It has been suggested above that there is reason to believe that monoliths were used by the Meitei in pre-Hindu time as sacrificial altars. There is indeed a good deal of evidence that blood sacrifice was commonplace among those peoples with whom the Meiteis had immediate contact. Reference has already been made to the sacrifices offered by the Purums to Sanāmahī; there is evidence of similar practices among the Kuki and Naga peoples, extending to human sacrifice. That the Loi, the people of Manipur who as yet are not fully within Hindu influence, engaged in ritual sacrifice is noted by Shakespear (1910a p. 11).<sup>19</sup> It is significant that the deity to whom the sacrifice was offered by the Loi of Andro, *Panam Ningthou*, who is specifically mentioned by Shakespear, was regarded by them as the special deity of the Meitei rāja, who was himself obliged to provide the sacrificial animals. Among these was a buffalo or mithan which used to be sacrificed on the occasion of the *lai harāoba* of the god, which took place one or three years after the building of a *laisang*. The Loi sagei responsible for providing the attendants were permitted to eat the animal. Pigs were sacrificed in those years when there was no *lai harāoba*. Furthermore when danger to a

16 Higgins ( n. d. 30 ) records also that in the *laiphām* of Nongsāba, north of Nunggoibi, a large stone was previously situated,

17 Location unknown.

18 The *Shagokshading* is not available to me, either in archaic or modern Manipuri: but there seems no reason to be unduly sceptical about Yumjao's dating.

19 The pagination on this MS is in the reverse order: page references given here have been renumbered correctly.



Meitei king was suspected he would send a pig and a cock to be sacrificed at Andro to *Panam Ningthou*. We may compare the method of sacrifice here to that recorded in the account of the sacrifice in the grove of Santhong : in both instances the sacrificial animals, although provided by the Hindu Meitei rājā, were actually slaughtered and eaten by non-Hindu outsiders. There is also evidence that certain other of the ancestral *lāi* previously demanded animal sacrifice. Shakespear (1913 : 433) notes that Pakhangba used to be worshipped by the sacrifice of a pig, while Nongpok Ningthou required in addition a pair of fowls. These were eaten by children who had not taken the sacred thread and were therefore not yet subject to Hindu dietary laws. Animal sacrifice was demanded on occasion in rites for curing of possession. Possession by a *hingchābi* (vampire) could be cured only by the sacrifice of a mithan (Shakespear 1913 : 452).

A further case is mentioned by Higgins (n. d. 31). On one occasion when rice crops were being attacked by caterpillars a pūjā was performed to a certain goddess *Laphurit Leima Wadagnu Chomkhāidoisibi*.<sup>20</sup> It is curious that the pūjā to this non-Manipuri *hāo* or Naga goddess had to be performed by the Meitei *Pandit Achaoba*.<sup>21</sup> In this case the sacrifice consisted of a pig, a cock, and an egg. The officiants were Koms from Sagang and Tonshen, who also ate the flesh. The remainder of the sacrificial offerings<sup>22</sup> was divided between the *māibās* and Manipuris present.

In the light of the references in the *OK* to blood sacrifice, which we shall discuss presently, there is little room to doubt that in pre-Hindu times the Meitei, as the peoples round about them, practised animal sacrifice. With the acceptance of

20 I have no further information on this particular deity, who is curiously said to have been the daughter of a hillman.

21 Higgins' notes must be authentic, despite this unusual feature : his field notes on this occasion were obtained from the *Pandit Achouba* himself.

22 Consisting of fish, paddy, molasses and milk for the *māibās* and fruit and sweetmeats and betel for the other Manipuris. The Koms were eft the salt and chillies.

Vaishṇava Hinduism and the consequent ban on blood sacrifice, the Meitei *māibās* were no longer free to carry out with approval the slaughter of sacrificial animals. The old sacrificial cults, however, evidently had a strong enough hold on the people for the practice to be continued well into the beginning of this century. The letter of the Hindu law was preserved by using non-Hindus to carry out the actual slaying and eating.

What does the Chronicle have to say on blood sacrifice ? The earliest reference to animal sacrifice occurs at the beginning of our period, during the reign of Kyāmba :

‘In 1392 sak. (1470 A. D.) King Kyāmba offered<sup>23</sup> a gayal at the foot of Khāri Hill<sup>24</sup> seeking victory over Kabo Kyang :<sup>25</sup> he was victorious over Kabo Kyang.’ (p. 10).

There is no indication in the text of the god to whom the gayal was offered. K. B. Singh (1964 : 4) has suggested that it was offered to Leimaren, regarded as a goddess of war ; he also suggests that this was not an uncommon event during this period. The second of these contentions is probably correct—the way in which the incident is recorded in the CK suggests that the readers would be familiar with the practice of offering animal sacrifices to gain the favour of the gods. We have found no evidence however to support the view either that the gayal was offered to Leimaren or that this particular goddess was associated with war. The deity involved here is not named, although it is possible that it may have been the deity of the area which was under attack. We shall refer below to a similar case, in which the victim was said to have been human (Shakespeare 1913 : 444).

The two references to the lavish display of sacrificial slaughter during the long and prosperous reign of king Khāgamba (1597-1652) are perhaps indicative of the increase in the status and authority of the king which took place during his reign. The first of these examples occurred in 1618 A. D.,

23 *iratle*, ‘immolated’.

24 Khari Ching : a hill situated between Manipur and Burma.

25 Kabo Kyang here means Burma not (with K. B. Singh) Khumbat.

and its occasion was the death of a child, Ibungo Mayāmba. It is possible, although not made explicit in the text, that this Mayāmba was the son of the king.<sup>26</sup>

'In the year of Shanthang Mayang, 1540 sak., (1618 A. D.) Ibungo Mayāmba was born. In that very same year, in Ingel, (June/July) he died, They tried to appease Ningthou Mārjing with wild pigs, dogs,<sup>27</sup> hens and pigeons : with all these creatures they worshipped him ; at every watering place<sup>28</sup> they sacrificed.' (OK p. 25).

The implication of the passage is that the *Lāi Mārjing* was thought to be responsible for the death of the child and that the sacrifices were offered as an appeasement to the god. The offerings were not made in the *lāi paham* alone, but were performed at every place where the people were accustomed to gather their water. Two different words are used here for the sacrificial act: *irātpa* (here translated as 'worshipped') is the common word we have met before for 'to immolate' ; *thaurība* (from *thoutouba* translated here as 'sacrifice'), although it also carried the meaning of immolation has the implications of a propitiatory offering : it thus means appeasing the *lāi* by offering him sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> We are dealing here then with a sacrifice not only offered to expiate past deeds (presumably regarded as the cause of the death of the infant Mayāmba) but also to ward off further disaster. The death of the child was viewed as a retribution on the part of the *Lāi Mārjing*, and the blood offerings were made to expiate the offence and prevent a repetition of the divine punishment.

<sup>26</sup> Khāgamba's father was also called Mayāmba, and the practice of naming a child after his grandfather would not be unusual.

<sup>27</sup> Unlike Vedic sacrifice the Meitei offering here included wild pigs and dogs. But if Shakespear's account (1913 : 441) is in any way typical of the earlier period the Meiteis used the Vedic method of strangulation before cutting the animal up for eating.

<sup>28</sup> *hidēn* = a place where the people gather to collect water from the river for domestic purposes.

<sup>29</sup> The word is used at present of non-blood offerings which are made to ensure that evil does not come upon the worshipper. The Meitei sacrifices differed in kind from Vedic sacrifices, which were basically supplicatory (see Donnell in *HERE* vol. 12 : 611).

The other reference during the reign of Khāgēmba has a rather different context :

'In the year of Laishriba 1553 sak. (1631 A. D.), Lāining-thou Khāgēmba, in the month of Lamda on the fifth day, a Wednesday, laid the foundations of the Kangla. It was dedicated at once. Many *lāi*, including Koubru, (were offered) sacrifices : under a canopy at Kuchu 100 each of buffalos, goats, sheep, cattle, geese, pigs, fowls, pigeons, dogs, fruit and ginger—without number were sacrificed (*thounie*) : he asked for long life.' (p. 27)

Here we have a hecatomb made with the object of securing long life for the king. The special mention of Koubru here is peculiar, although it is evident that the offerings were not made to him alone.

It would seem from the *CK* that animal sacrifices did not either before or after the reign of Khāgēmba, reach such gigantic proportions, and even during his reign such lavishness would seem to have been altogether unusual. There is ample evidence from the *Chronicles* that Khāgēmba's reign marked a considerable increase in the power and the pomp of the king, and the sacrificial displays we have discussed above were no doubt but a part of this royal ostentation. They were however only a more lavish example of a religious practice which had been well established in Manipur, and they did not mark any new departure from those practices.<sup>30</sup>

There remains the question of human sacrifice. There are several references in the *Chronicles* to the bringing back of heads of enemies by the Meiteis in earlier times.<sup>31</sup> But there seems no real evidence that these were meant as ritual offerings to the gods. The removal of the heads of slain foes may best be explained as taking trophies of war, the warriors thereby

30 Further examples of sacrifice in the *CK* will be dealt with below in the section on Meitei *lāi* (d).

31 The most interesting of these is a reference to the removal of the head of a Burmese Queen during the 15th century. The practice was still not unusual as late as the time as Bhāgyachandra (see e. g. *CK* for 1790 A. D.)

bringing back evidence of their bravery in battle. There was certainly no ritual cannibalism. The latter was so alien to the Meitei outlook that the advent of 'cannibals from the south' during the time of Mayāmba was regarded as very curious (*OK* 20 ; cp. Jhalajit Singh 1965 : 95)

Shakespear has an interesting note in his *Religion of Manipur* which could possibly indicate that human sacrifice was practised at an earlier period (1913 : 443f). According to a verbatim report taken by Shakespear from a *lāi manāi* ('slave of the *lāi*') of Wāngpurel, certain small portions of the slave's body were extracted and offered before the *lāi*. According to this particular incident the *manāi*, a man from Moirāng, where the *lāiphām* was situated, was paid in cash and kind and also exempted from tax and forced labour in return for acting in this capacity. He was taken by the Rājā himself and the Senāpati to Wāngpurel's *lāiphām* and, as mantras were recited, some blood was extracted from his foot, and his hair and nails cut. These were offered before the *Lāi* and subsequently buried in the *lāiphām*. During the ceremony the *manāi* was tied and not permitted to move. Shakespear was of the opinion that prior to the annexation of Manipur by the British in 1891 such happenings were not uncommon, the victim usually being waylaid by the *māibās* in some remote place at night. Victims were believed to die soon afterwards of a wasting illness. It could be argued that what we have here is a survival of a much older human sacrifice, whether by directly killing the victim or by using those items extracted from his body to bewitch him and bring about his death. Indeed Shakespear also records rumour of an actual case in which the victim was killed before the blood, hair and nails were removed.<sup>32</sup> It would be presumtuous to conclude however, in the absence of any stronger evidence either in the Manipuri sources or elsewhere, that human sacrifice was a feature of the old Meitei religion.

32 In this case the blood, hair and nails were buried beneath a stone at Tegnopal (*Tengoupul*) on the Burma Road, with the object of strengthening the *lāi* of that place to drive back the Burmese invaders.

(d) *The Place of the Meitei Lāi*

There are numerous explicit references to the traditional *lāi* during this period. Some have been referred to above in our discussion of sacrifice in medieval Manipur. In the Chronicle there are a further sixteen explicit references to worship of the *lāi*, between 1589 A. D. and the accession of Charai Rongba. Some of these references are brief and enigmatic, and mention *lāi* of whom we have little or no further information, but there are also allusions to the more important deities we have dealt with above in Part I. The descriptions of (Koubaren) as 'firing a gun' (1627 A. D. p. 26) and 'being on fire' (1676 A. D., p. 36) we have discussed earlier. There are two references also to Nongshāba, who, as we have seen, was the father of the Moirāng god Thāngjing. The first, in the reign of Khāgembā, simply records the dedication of a shrine :

'In 1555 sak (1633 A. D.) Lāiningthou Nongshāba's *kangla* was dedicated in the summer' (*CK* p. 27).

The use of the term *kangla* here is curious, for the *kangla* is properly the area in Imphal in which the former palace was situated. It is unlikely that *kangla* is used here simply, by synecdoche, to mean 'palace of the *lāi*': the more likely explanation is that this particular *lāiphām* was situated in the *kangla* area. Thus the phrase probably means 'Lāiningthou Nongshāba's *lāiphām* within the area called *kangla*'. In this case we have some evidence that the god originally connected with Moirang in the south was now within Imphal itself, the original area of the Ningthoujas. *Yek* deities had now become the property of the whole nation.

The second reference raises more problems :

'In the month of Ingel, (June/July) on the fifth day, Monday, Sija Yāoshombi (and) the elephant Pisandra were offered to Lāiningthou Nongshāba' (*CK* for 1588 [1666 A. D.] p. 38).

It must be noted that there is no suggestion of sacrifice in the text. The word used for 'offered' is the usual term for 'give' (*katpa*). But in what did this giving consist ?

An indication of the probable meaning is given in a similar incident in (1681 A. D.), in which the *lāi* concerned was Kāsa :

‘In the year of Shāiron Nāimu, 1603 sak., (1618 A. D.) in the month of Sajiphu, (March/April) the king married off Nāoroibam Chaubi to *Lāi Kāsa*’ (CK p. 39).

Here the word ‘married off’ is the usual term *luhongba*. There are similar references to such sacred marriages elsewhere in the later history of Manipur. In the time of Garīb Niwāz, for example, we read of the marriage of one Angom Chāobi to Lāiwa Hāibā (CK p. 79). Here the term used means literally ‘escorted’, which is used elsewhere of marriage between a princess and the king’s guru (CK for 1738 A. D.) and also for the marriage of a prince (CK for 1737 A. D.) Even more significant perhaps is the case of Bhāgyachandra’s daughter Sija Lāiroibi, who is believed to have played a large part in the perfection of the Rās Lila. She, according to tradition, herself was married to an image of Govinda. Here we see the traditional practice of marriage to the *lāi* being adopted by Vaishnavite Hinduism.<sup>33</sup>

One other passage within our present period is relevant here ; it refers to 1689 A. D.

‘In the month of *Mera* (September/October) on the full moon, a Tuesday, Lāiren Lākpa Khoinei touched *lāi* Leisangthem Channu, the wife of *Lāi* Tāibung Khāiba, and there was armed fighting at Kangpokpi.<sup>34</sup> Some were sent to Sugnu.’ (p. 43)

The implication of this passage is that an attempt was made on the part of a high official (Lāiren Lākpa is a title) to sexually assault a girl (Channu) who had been married to the deity (*Lāi* Tāibung Khāiba). This resulted in armed fighting and bloodshed and the subsequent banishment of those involved.

This latter incident demonstrates that ‘marriage to the *lāi*’ had nothing to do with sacred prostitution : the ‘wives of the

<sup>33</sup> Relevant here too is that portion of the *Lāi Harāoba* in which a young girl is selected to be the *māibi* of the *lāi*.

<sup>34</sup> Situated some twenty-five miles from Imphal to the north.

*lāi'* were not hierodoulai or devadāsīs, although the devadāsīs did go through a kind of marriage ceremony to the image of the god. Indeed the evidence of the above passage seems to suggest rather a perpetual virginity, violation of which was severely punished. Present day pandits explain the marriage to the *lāi* as indicating that the girl in question had the special care of the *lāiphām*, and was a kind of priestess-guardian of the cult. Although she lived in her own house, certain restrictions were placed on her : she would not eat with others, nor could she come into contact with the ritually unclean. It is significant that the same restrictions now apply to *māibīs*, who are also described as wives of the *lāi*.

From the fact that we do not hear of marriage to the *lāi* before the time of Khāgēmba it might perhaps be argued that we have here a trace of Hinduization. Such a thesis however is very doubtful. The fact that the Meitei 'marriage to the *lāi*' and its counterpart in India proper are so different in content argues against too easy comparisons. The only point of agreement is the dedication of a girl to a deity, which is indeed a widespread custom, to be found in several ancient cultures. Furthermore, as we shall argue below, traces of Hindu influence in other respects are slight as to make it doubtful in the case in point. Despite the silence of the earlier part of the *CK* on marriage to the *lāi*, it would seem better to regard the practice as a traditional one : the incident of the marriage of Bhāgyachandra's daughter to Govinda indicated rather that the borrowing was on the Hindu side, not vice versa.

*Lāi Kāsa*, to whom the girl Nāoroibam Chāobi was married was evidently in favour during our period. There are no fewer than five separate references to him between the years 1635 A. D. and 1681 A. D. Little is known of this deity today,<sup>35</sup> although he conceivably was the god of a particular locality, for in Khagēmba's reign we read :

35 Although he is still revered by some older people. According to some informants this *lāi* is identified with the spirits of infants who have died before the age of three, and are therefore buried instead of being cremated.



'In the year of Moirāng Ting, 1557 sak. (1635 A. D.), they hunted wild cattle at Thoubal, and caught them at Namu Hill: having arrived at *Lāi Kāsa* they distributed the meat in every village'. (pp. 27/28)

The phrase *Lāi kāsa* has no object, and we must probably assume either *lāiphām* or, more likely, 'area'. The meaning will then be that the cattle were caught in the particular area which fell under the jurisdiction of *Lai Kasa* and that meat offerings were therefore made to him before being consumed in the surrounding villages. The fact that here, as in the great holocaust of four years earlier, cattle are mentioned indicates to how small a degree Hindu restrictions had percolated through to Manipur in Khāgemba's time. If *Lāi Kāsa* were a local deity, however, his worship has also spread further afield. Apart from the reference to Kāngpokpi he also had a shrine in the *Kangla* area:

'In 1559 sak. (1637 A.D.) *Lāi Kāsa's* Kangla was dedicated' (OK p. 28). The wording is the same as we have noted, with Lāiningthou Nongshāba, in the year 1633 A.D. In the two other allusions to this deity his shrine is described by the non-Manipuri word *phura*.<sup>36</sup> It is clear that the *lāi's* cult was widespread during this period.

There is one further allusion to a *lāi* of note during this period, to Pānthoibi, for a *sang nambonba* (building with a sloping roof),<sup>37</sup> was built. The worship of this deity is very ancient in Manipur, and in the following years became increasingly important.

The two remaining allusions are obscure and the *lāi* is not named. In 1671 A.D. the Chronicle records that Ningthem

36 'In Hāowoibam Muba's year, 1576 sak (1654 A.D.), in the month of Sajibu (March/April) they laid the foundations of *Lāi Kāsa's phura*' (p. 31); again 'In the year of Kheirakpam Lontai, 1600 sak, the month of Kālen (April/May) began on a Friday: on the 14th day, Thursday, *Lāi* (1678 A.D.) *Kāsa's phura* was inaugurated (*sangkāba*), (p. 38)

37 This raises the question of whether a temple in the style of the Burmese pagoda is meant: we shall see below that Burmese architects were employed in Manipur in Charai Rongba's time.

Sija (presumably the queen) 'went up' to Lang māiching<sup>38</sup> to worship (*lāi khurumba*=to bow down, do obeisance). In the following year a temple (*phura*) was erected in the same place.<sup>39</sup> It is possible that Langmaiching should be identified with Nongmāijing, which subsequently became identified with the abode of Śiva. If this is correct we have another example of a Hindu deity assuming the role and the place of a traditional, but unnamed, *lāi*.<sup>40</sup>

(e) *The Extent of Hindu Influence During the Medieval Period*

It is clear from the above evidence that the hold of the traditional Meitei *lāi* upon the people during this period was very strong. Apart from the frequent allusions to the *umang lāi*, to tree worship, and to the cultic use of stones, we have found clear evidence for animal sacrifice and for the cultic worship of traditional *lāi* in other ways. It cannot be denied that the Meitei *lāi* occupied an important place in the lives of the people during this period. Moreover that Hindu tabus had not as yet any appreciable hold in Manipur is demonstrated not only by the allusions to blood sacrifices but also to the explicit references to the eating of meat and consumption of wine, practices which incidentally also continued for some time after the formal acceptance of Vaishṇavism. There are several allusions to the eating of meat during this period.<sup>41</sup> The first of these cases, 1582 A. D., is specially interesting since on this occasion the *māibā* consumed the meat and wine. Whether this was a case of a ritual meal, conjoined with the taking of an oath, is not certain from the text. Wine was drunk

38 *Ching*=hill.

39 Taking *langmāichingda* here to mean 'at Langmāiching' rather than 'on Sunday.'

40 The remaining reference is to the incident during the drought of 1616 sak., when *Lāi Punthiba* was displayed.

41 See CK for 1582, 1640, 1668, A D., in two cases consumption of alcohol is mentioned in conjunction with eating of meat.

frequently.<sup>42</sup> Hodson was probably too enthusiastic when he claimed that 'the early time (i.e. prior to the 18th century) seems to have been one long feast with hecatombs of fat cattle and oceans of spirituous drinks, even culminating on more than one instance in fatalities due to appreciation of excessive good cheer' (1910 : 47). Nevertheless it is clear enough that the Meitei of this period were by no means ascetic in respect of food and drink and that Hindu restrictions in these matters had no such hold as they came to acquire during a later age.

What then was the extent of Hindu influence at this time ? The concrete evidence seems to indicate that it was very little. There are for example no explicit references in the Chronicles to the worship of any of the Hindu gods. Apart from the presence of Brahmin migrants, to which we shall allude again below, there are three possible areas in which Hindu (or in the case of the third, Buddhist) influence may be discerned.

The first of these concerns the status of the king. We have noticed already that in Khāgamba's time a number of measures were introduced which enhanced the position of the king. Riding in a palauquin and the building of storied houses are instances of this. More important is the fact that in 1608 A.D. Khāgamba began to be addressed (the words imply for the first time) as *Lāiningthou*, and his subjects (or at least those who desired advancement) began to bow down to him. *Lāiningthou* properly means 'god (*lāi*) king (*ningthou*)'. The status of the king evidently attained in Khāgamba's reign a degree of honour which was previously unknown. There may be some reason to believe that the Hindu conception of the divine king<sup>43</sup> (which itself came from the Middle East) has influenced this move towards sacralizing the kingship in Manipur. This is

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42 The Manipuri word is *yu*, cognate to the *zu* of the Naga tribes. Besides those occasions in note 41, wine is mentioned in the entries for 1601 and 1610 A.D.

43 On Indian kingship see K.M. Kapadia 1947, Kane 1930 III, and J. Gonda, 1946-7. 36-71.

of course difficult to demonstrate conclusively, but it may be postulated that the increasing contact with the Indian Sub-continent allowed for the percolation through to Manipur of concepts of this kind, which would no doubt have been welcomed and exploited by a monarch of Khāgamba's undoubted acumen. Even if this be allowed, however, it does not necessarily indicate that Hindu, or specifically Vaishṇavite, religious concepts had any great hold at this period on the people as a whole.

Secondly there is the possible adoption of cremation as a means of disposing of the dead. But here the evidence for the pre-Hindu Meitei practice is conflicting. Hodson (1910 : 116) thought that there was some evidence that the dead were buried in pre-Hindu times<sup>44</sup> and that the dead were interred outside the enclosures of the houses. This was certainly sometimes the case, for not only during the Hindu reformation of Garīb Niwāz but also as early as the reign of Pākḥomba edicts were promulgated ordering the removal of graves from residential areas.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand the *NL*, as we have noted above, attribute to Poireiton's group the custom of cremating the dead, which would mean that both cremation and burial were known quite early among the Meiteis. Furthermore the first explicit reference to cremation in the *CK* is very curious :

'In the year of Heisham Kara, 1578 sak. (1656 A. D.), in the month of Kālen (April-May), Meiteileima Takhembī's father Hanjaba the smith died. In the month of Inḡel (June-July) Mongjibam Pukranba Khoira died. In the month of Lāngban (August-September) they were cremated' (*OK* p. 32).

This presupposes the keeping of the body for between one and three months before cremation—a practice in stark contradiction to the usual Indian method of cremating as soon as possible after death. Unless we make the disagreeable

<sup>44</sup> Hodson refers to the practice, which is still carried out, of placing the body in a coffin-like box on the pyre.

<sup>45</sup> see *CK* (1677 A.D.)

assumption that the body was allowed to putrify for this period we are left with the alternative that the body was first buried and then exhumed for cremation. This would be unusual but not impossible.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps the early Meitei *yeks* differed in their method of disposing of the dead. If the *NL* is to be accepted as accurate at this point it is not necessary to postulate Hindu influence in the adoption of cremation among the Meitei. It must however have been the case that the Meitei of this period had observed the methods used by Brahmin immigrants in disposing of their dead, and this could well have been a factor in their reviving what was after all an earlier traditional practice. It was not until the time of Garīb Niwāz that cremation became the norm. The *OK* records that when this king removed the bones of his forefathers to the Chindwin for cremation this became the custom of all the people. This occurred in 1724 A. D.

Finally we have the strange allusions to 'sculptors' from Kyang. Both in 1601 A. D. and in 1647 A. D. the *OK* records that the reigning rājā obtained sculptors from Kyang, in both instances after the defeat of the Kyangs by the Meiteis. Kyang is an area in Burma. It is possible that we have here the beginning of the cultic use of images in Manipur, and in fact we read very little in the *CK* of images of the *lāi*.<sup>47</sup>

Higgins (n. d. 43) records in his field notes Yumjao's opinion that there was a great similarity between Buddhist icons and those found in Manipur, which is certainly the case. This seems to presuppose some such contact as is indicated by the use of Kyang sculptors.<sup>48</sup> What this seems to have been is the borrowing of the forms only however, for although the representations of the Meitei *lāi* might, as Yumjao claims, bear

46 see *CK* [1677 A.D.]

47 There is no Meitei word for image, the loanword *murti* being used. Shakespear (1913:427) points out that there is no image of the *lāi*, although a brass mask may be used at the *Lāi Harāoba*.

48 Visual art has never been a strong point of the Meitei; the only outstanding example of Manipuri religious art is the paintings of the Khamba-Thoibi legend in Moirang.

striking similarity to Buddha icons, there is no evidence whatever, either during this period or at a later date, of Buddhist religious beliefs.

It would appear from above that there is no very clear evidence of any Hinduizing influence before the time of Charai Rongba, and it is the view of the writer that such an interpretation of the facts is broadly correct.<sup>49</sup> There are however other points that need to be made and which indicate that there was a Hindu presence in Manipur even though it attained no very great importance.

Firstly, according to the *Bāmon Khunthok*, which is probably a fairly accurate record of Brahmin migrations, the first Brahmin settlers came to Manipur during the reign of Kyāmba, and a fairly steady stream entered the state from various parts of India after that, presumably with the connivance of the rājās, for they were allowed to settle. Many were allotted clan (*sagei*) names, which they bear today, and were absorbed into the Meitei community. Since they did not usually bring their women with them many intermarried with Metiei women and this hastened their assimilation.<sup>50</sup> One such marriage is recorded in the *CK* for 1628 A. D., where one Chakparem Channu is said to have married one of the yogis who arrived that year. The Chronicle does not record many actual migrations, although the reference to this marriage and to the death of a Brahmin (presumably of some note) in 1662 A. D., indicates that the writers were well aware of the Brahmin presence. We must assume that Brahmin influence had been

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49 Jhalajit (1965 : 82) following Atombapu, speaks of a Vishṇu image given to Kyamba in 1545-1586 A.D. by the King of Pong. I can find no evidence to support this, and the absence of other traces of Vaishṇavite religion at this time indicates the contrary.

50 McCulloch (1859 : 18) noted that the Brahmins were obliged to marry women of the *kei* class. These were slaves who had to provide and pound the rājā's rice. This greatly lowered the status of the Brahmins, and if they were not respected socially we may assume that their doctrines were not readily acceptable either. It is an indication of how rapidly the religious outlook changed that in 1738 A.D. a maiden of the royal house was married to the king's guru.

steadily at work in Manipur for some time before the actual acceptance of the Vaishnavite faith. Furthermore Charai Rongba's taking of the sacred thread in 1706 A. D. is difficult to appreciate unless he had for some time before this been exposed to Hindu ideas—a sudden radical conversion is ruled out by his continued support of the traditional *lāi*.

Again it must be noted that the *CK* is a Court Chronicle and does not give us a full picture of events as they affected the common people. It seems likely that there was a certain amount of Hinduizing during the medieval period and identification of local with Hindu deities. This should not be taken too far, for as we have seen there is no specific mention of Hindu deities during this time, and the several sacrifices to meitei *lāi* were evidently shared by the people as a whole. Thus while we must allow for a certain degree of Hindu presence in Manipur before the time of Charai Rongba we have no evidence that it was either very large or very vigorous. The turning point in the religious history of Manipur awaited the reigns of Charai Rongba and, more especially, of his son Garīb Niwāz.

## CHAPTER IX

### CHARAI RONGBA TO BHĀGYACHANDRA ; THE RISE OF VAISHNAVISM TO PROMINENCE

With the accession of Charai Rongba we pass to the period in which Hinduism, in one or other of its forms, became the dominant religion of Manipur, largely through the support and patronage of the reigning monarchs. This was not, however, a smooth process. In the time of Charai Rongba (A D 1697-1706) there was little attempt to impose Hinduism upon the people as a whole. Although the king himself formally took the sacred thread he did not attempt to establish Hinduism as the state religion, nor did he neglect the worship of the traditional *lāi*. With Garīb Niwāz ( 1709—1748 ) we have reached a stage where Vaishṇavism became the official religion of the state. A serious attempt was made to impose it upon the people as a whole, and punishments were prescribed for those indulging in blatant non-Hindu activities. During this period also we have to reckon with a resistance to change on the part of the devotees of the traditional cults, particularly the *māibās*, which appears to be reflected in the vacillating attitude towards the *lāi* shown by the king himself. The reign of Bhāgyachandra,<sup>1</sup> despite the ravages of successive Burmese invasions,<sup>2</sup> was a time when Hinduism was consolidated. It gained a firmer hold over the people as a whole and had an enthusiastic devotee in the king himself. But that the old religion was by no means dead is seen in the pagan reaction which marked the reign of Bhāgyachandra's son, Labanya-chandra. This Manipuri Julian tried to expunge Vaishṇavism

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1 Bhāgyachandra's official reign was from 1763-98, but it appears that before this time he also reigned in conjunction with his brother Gour Shyam, who was a cripple and therefore not a suitable person to act as king during this troubled period.

2 Or perhaps because of them : Shakespear (1913 : 444) suggests that it was during the exile of so many of the Meiteis to Assam during the period when Manipur was occupied by the Burmese that Hinduism gained a stronger hold.



and reassert the old *lāi* ; but the attempt proved abortive, for he was assassinated after a brief reign of only three years.

According to the Manipuri scholar K. B. Singh (1963 : 66-7) there were three distinct stages which marked the introduction of Vaishṇavism into Manipur. In the view of this writer it was in 1704 when the first emissaries of the new faith arrived. These were of the school of Nimbārka, and the missionary involved had the same name as the sect's founder. Charai Rongba and his family were initiated into this sect, but little progress was made among the common people. The second quarter of the 18th century marked the arrival of a second school of Vaishṇavism, the Rāmānandī. A Brahmin, one Śāntidās, came to Manipur from Sylhet and introduced the worship of Rām and Hanumān. He became the guru of Garib Niwāz, and the Rāmānandī school replaced that of Nimbārka. Finally in the second quarter of the 18th century the school of Chaitanya percolated through to Manipur and later in that century, under the patronage of Bhāgyachandra, replaced the earlier schools.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, according to this writer, three distinct schools of the Vaishṇavite faith appeared in Manipur during the 18th century, each displacing its predecessor in the favour of the ruling monarch. Before examining the evidence for this reconstruction of events it will be convenient here to digress a little, in order to outline the main characteristics of these three schools insofar as they affected Manipur.

(a) *Vaishnavite Schools which Influenced Meitei Religion*

There is some doubt as to exactly when the founder of the first named sect lived,<sup>4</sup> although the weight of scholarly opinion seems to be that Nimbārka lived after Rāmānuja

<sup>3</sup> Singh gives the names of the missionaries as Gangnarayan, Krishnacharan, Kunjabihari, Nidhiran and Ramgopal, and the name of the first Meitei convert as Ngangbam Selungba.

<sup>4</sup> On the Sanak or Nimbārka sect see Eliot (1954 II:230) Bhandarkar (1965:62ff) Tattwananda (n.d., : 35ff) and on the philosophic teaching of Nimbārka especially Radhakrishnan (1962 II : 751-2).

(Bhandarkar 1265 : 62 ; Eliot 1954 : II 230). Bhandarkar points out that he flourished at a period when the concept of *bhakti* had gained in importance, and there is evidence that he himself was regarded as an incarnation of the *Sudarśana*, the discus of Vishṇu. His doctrines were enshrined in a commentary on the *Brāhma-sūtras* and a small work of ten stanzas (the *Daśaslokī* or *Siddhāntaratna*). His main religious concept was that of *dvaitādvaitamata* or dualistic nonduality. By this he meant that matter and the soul are distinct from God, but nevertheless are identical with him as the waves are with the sea. Matter and soul are identical with God because they have no separate existence ; they are dependent upon God both for their existence and their action. According to Bhandarkar Nimbārka kept closer than did Rāmānuja to the basic doctrines of *bhakti* as characterized by love rather than meditation, and by his emphasis upon self-surrender (*prapatti*) by which love for God is generated. In contrast to the earlier saint, Nimbārka exalted Kṛishṇa and his mistress Rādhā as the deities to whom alone worship is to be given.

The teaching of Rāmānanda<sup>5</sup> differed in several important respects. He also came after Rāmānuja, and Bhandarkar puts the time of his activity as around the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries. His most radical reform was in his disregard of caste, which went even as far as allowing outcastes to eat with Brahmins, provided they were devotees of Vishṇu. Unlike Nimbārka he encouraged the use of the vernacular in worship. The most direct contrast to the Nimbārka sect was in prescribing the worship of Rām and Sītā instead of Kṛishṇa and Rādhā. The sect was in consequence, to quote Bhandarkar ( 1965 : 66 ) 'purer and more chaste', and left little room for the erotic extravagances which marked the later development of some of the other schools of Vaishṇavism.

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5 On the Rāmānandī sect see Bhandarkar (1965:66-7) and Tattwananda (n.d. 19-20).

The third sect, that of Chaitanya,<sup>6</sup> is especially associated with Bengal. It was this movement which was destined to become dominant in Manipur. Chaitanya was born in 1485 and became, according to the sources, something of a child prodigy. At an early age he manifested the kind of emotional religious attitude which was to characterize the future of the sect. At the age of twenty five he became a *sannyāsī* and settled at Puri, making the occasional pilgrimages to Brindaban and Banares. Although, as Eliot ( 1954 : II 253 ) points out, his theology was not original, the magnetic appeal of his personality and his message quickly led to a flourishing movement. Negatively he condemned the ritual system of the *Brāhmaṇas*, attacked rites and ceremonies, and disapproved of asceticism.<sup>7</sup> Positively he preached the brotherhood of all men, regardless of caste<sup>8</sup> and accepted even Muslims into his movement. Śrī Kṛishṇa was regarded as the supreme object of *bhakti*. As Bhandarkar puts it : 'Kṛishṇa is the highest god and is so beautiful that he excites love for himself even in the heart of the god of love, and is enamoured of himself' ( 1965 : 84 ). There is some similarity between the teaching of Chaitanya and that of Nimbārka. Both emphasised that love for god is of supreme importance : for Chaitanya the soul, through this love, drinks in the Supreme God as the bee drinks in honey, until he becomes unconscious of his separate existence and is absorbed in the Supreme. This is effected through *bhakti* alone. Chaitanya is also in agreement with Nimbārka on exalting the place of Rādhā, the consort of Kṛishṇa. 'When love attains its highest pitch', comments Bhandarkar on this, 'it constitutes itself into Rādhā

6 On Chaitanya see especially S. K. De (1961:34-110) Bhandarkar (1965:82ff) Tattwananda (n. d. 39ff) Rhadhakrishnan (1962:II 760-5) M. T. Kennedy (1925) also R. G. Nath, A Survey of the Chaitanya Movement in the *Cultural Heritage of India IV* (1956 edition) pp. 186-200 ; and the *Sri Chaitanya Caritamṛta* of Krishnadasa Kabiraja.

7 He himself was twice married before he began his work.

8 Later followers of Chaitanya were not so liberal, and caste reestablished itself among some of them after his death.

who is the most loveable of all and full of all qualities' ( 1965 : 85 ).

Perhaps more important for our purpose than his theology is the way in which it was worked out in actual worship. Early on in his career Chaitanya manifested that kind of religious enthusiasm which has always been associated with ecstatic religion. The god was worshipped in song and dance, firstly in private but later in public. These *kīrtans* often reached such a pitch of fervour that the devotees, Chaitanya himself in particular, became senseless. S. K. De (1961:79ff) has given us an excellent description of these activities :

'The increasing fervour displayed in the Kirtana parties proved contagious by creating a highly emotionalised atmosphere. This method of congregated devotional excitement, by means of enthusiastic chorus singing to the accompaniment of peculiar drums and cymbals, along with rhythmical bodily movements ending in an ecstatic abandon of dancing, proved very fruitful indeed in utilizing group-emotion, and soon became a distinctive feature of the faith'.<sup>9</sup>

The *kīrtan* is one important aspect of the Chaitanyite faith which became significant in Manipur. Among others, are the place given to Rādhā, and the sectarian marks.<sup>10</sup>

It is these three Vaishṇavite sects then which, it is claimed, were introduced into Manipur during the 18th century, and which, in various degrees, gained royal and common acceptance. There is, outside the Manipuri sources, very little information to assist us in arriving at a date for the arrival of these schools in the state. K. B. Singh, as we have seen, put the earliest Vaishṇavite influence at the beginning of the 18th century, and claimed that it was Vaishṇavism of the Nimbārka

9 See to similar effect the remark of J. N. Farquhar (1967:293) that Chaitanya 'won his success by a tempest of devotion'.

10 The sectarian mark consists of two white perpendicular lines leading from the forehead and converging at the bridge of the nose; then continuing at a single line to the tip of the nose. It may be noted that, like the devotees of Nimbārka, Chaitanyite Vaishṇavas wear *tulasī* beads.

sect. Indeed he states categorically that 'there is no evidence of conversion of the Meiteis to Vaishṇavism during the 17th century'. (1963 : 66) Singh gives the date of the arrival of the first missionary of the Nimbārka sect as 1704, and states that in that same year he became the guru of the king and initiated him. A rather different version is given by Jhalajit (1965 : 115), based upon the family history of the Guru Aribams.<sup>11</sup> According to this account a Brahmin named Krishnamāchārya (or Rāi Vanamāli) came to Manipur from Śveta Gangā, Puri, with his wife and some companions, in Mera (October) 1703, and initiated the king into Vaishṇavite faith in the following year. The guru was rewarded by a *daksina* consisting of a village, one hundred acres of paddy fields and a storied house. Which of these two versions is the more accurate it is impossible to say at present.<sup>12</sup> The CK is not explicit as to who it was who initiated Charai Rongba or to which sect he belonged. It is not easy to see however how a Brahmin from outside Manipur could not only have gained the ear of the king but also have converted him to a foreign religion within the space of six months or less. If we take account of the possibility of local opposition to the new faith this is even less likely. We need to assume therefore that there had already been at least some Vaishṇavite influence in court circles for some time before Charai Rongba actually took the sacred thread, to make the CK seem credible at this point.

Kennedy (1926 : 73) seems to bear out this contention. He believed that there were indications of the introduction of the Chaitanya sect into Manipur as early as the 17th century,

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11. Guru Aribam=Old Guru, a title given (although when is uncertain) to the gurus of Charai Rongba to distinguish them from the Gurumayums, who were the gurus of Bhāgychandra.

12. It is possible that these are different versions of the same tradition. According to the *Bāmon Khunthok* the Guru Aribams who settled in Manipur during the reign of Charai Rongba came from Śveta Gangā, Puri. The same book records a considerable number of Brahmin settlements during this period.

and the disciples of Narottam were instrumental in this. The Chronicles, of course, deal with the importance of the new religion only in so far as it affected matters of state : they do not deal with its hold upon the people as a whole. Kennedy's account seems to be correct. Vaishṇavite influence must have percolated through to Manipur by the end of the 17th century for it to have gained some ground and thus come to the notice of the king. Further, in the absence of any conclusive proof to the contrary, this is likely to have been Vaishṇavism of the Chaitanya sect, which at the time was still a comparatively young and vigorous movement.

(b) *Charai Rongba : The Beginning of Royal support for Vaishṇavism.*

Charai Rongba ascended the throne in 1697 A. D. and reigned in relative peace for some eleven years. No events of any great importance took place in his reign, save for a rebellion on the part of one of the subject hill peoples and certain natural calamities. The religion of the earlier part of his reign, in so far as it is noted in the *OK*, seems to have been dominated by worship of the traditional *lāi*, and even after his assumption of the sacred thread the *lāi* still occupy a large place in the Chronicles. Immediately upon his accession, for example, he raised a tablet before the temple of *Lāi Kāsa*, and had it inscribed with the laws of the country. In the same year a temple of Pānthoibi, one of the most important of the traditional goddesses, was begun. This was dedicated in 1700 A. D. but caught fire the following year. There are several references also to images of the *lāi* being made, including Pānthoibi and Lāiwā Hāibā. That other Meitei customs were not neglected is seen in the reference to marriage to the *lāi*, in this case Nongshāba, in 1700 A. D. The disregard at this stage of Hindu customs is also to be seen, for at the beginning of his reign the king not only hunted wild cattle, but also ate the meat at Kangla<sup>13</sup> [ 1698 A. D. ]. There is in

13 There is also a reference to Khuman women drinking wine in

fact no explicit reference to Hinduism in the years immediately before 1704 A. D., The Chronicle notes somewhat abruptly in this year :

'In the year 1626 sak [1704 A. D.] the month of Sajibu ( March/April ) began on a Saturday. On the 5th day, a Wednesday, King Charai Rongba and those who were to<sup>14</sup> take the sacred thread fasted on that very same day. They took the sacred thread on a subsequent day.' *CK* p. 56.

Apparently the assumption of the thread was preceded by a day's fasting, and the king was evidently accompanied by some of his nobles in the act of initiation into a new religion. For the first time in the Chronicles we now hear of the erection of temples dedicated to Hindu deities. A temple<sup>15</sup> to Vishnu was started in 1707 A. D. which indicates that it was the Vaishnavite faith which had been accepted. At the same time, however, the worship of Durgā received support, for a temple of Kālī, called in Manipuri Kālikā, was begun in the same year. This particular temple had short life, for it collapsed soon after being dedicated in the following year.<sup>16</sup> This is the first reference to Kālī in the Chronicles although we must assume that the goddess had been known to some extent earlier. At a later date, when the processes of Hinduization had got well under way, the great goddess Pānthoibi became

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1702 A.D. Although not necessarily pre-Hindu, there is a curious note that the king 'went to the land of Wāngkhei ( i. e. the Angom territory, not far from Kangla) to consult (or learn) spells'. Since a death is noted immediately afterwards, and a smallpox epidemic is also said to have occurred, we may surmise that the king attempted to allay the epidemic by magical means and failed.

14 The implication of the Manipuri *loubā* is probably 'were to take', although it could possibly be construed as 'had taken'.

15 The word used here is *kiyōng*, and archaic term.

16 *CK* p. 59. Presumably it was this temple which was designed by a Burmese architect, mentioned in the *CK* entry for 1628 [1706 A. D.], for we read that he left Manipur immediately after the collapse of the temple. If this suggestion is correct we have evidence of the influence of Burmese architecture as well as sculpture.

identified with Kālī. At this stage of development however there is no evidence this had occurred, for that Pānthoibi retained her individuality is seen by the fact that in 1708 A. D. the same year in which Kālī's temple was dedicated—repairs to Pānthoibi's compound were also carried out. Even in Shakespear's time the identification was still incomplete. There is indeed very little indication that the assumption of the sacred thread made very much difference to the religious life of the people.<sup>17</sup> The old gods continued to be worshipped and temples in their honour were still erected.<sup>18</sup> Burial also apparently continued as a common method of disposal of the dead ( *CK* p. 60 ) [ 1708 A. D. ] While Hinduism had the royal support, it as yet coexisted rather than displaced the traditional gods. The period of energetic proselytizing and of the persecution of dissenting religious groups was still in the future.

(c) *Garīb Niwāz : Hinduism as the State Religion*

Garīb Niwāz<sup>19</sup> ascended the throne of Manipur in<sup>20</sup> 1709 A. D. His reign was politically one of the most successful

17 There is a tradition that the singing of *kirtan* was commenced during this period : if this is so we have a positive evidence of Chaitanyite Vaishnavism.

18 We read of the dedication of a three storied temple in the Kangla in 1708 A.D. and in the following year ( the last of Charai Rongba's reign ) the dedication of a temple to Lāiwa Hāiba.

19 His reign name was Mayāmba, and he is also known as Pāmheiba. The popular Persian name Garīb Niwāz ( 'Cherisher of the Poor' ) indicates that Islamic influence had reached Manipur by this time. The Chronicle is less concerned with his benefactions to the poor than with his military and religious achievements.

20 There is some discrepancy between the Manipuri sources and works in English as to the significant dates of Garīb Niwāz' reign. Pemberton (1835:38) remarks that the chronology of Manipuri history was largely confirmed by the records of Ava, with a difference of a few years. Gait (1963) and Harvey (1925) appear to have generally followed Pemberton's dating. None of these writers had access to the Manipuri Chronicles, although Pemberton did have a Shan manuscript which he had translated into Manipuri and which at a number of points confirms both the events



in the history of Manipur. Apparently in fulfilment of his father's wishes,<sup>21</sup> he attacked Burma on several occasions, at least three times leading his armies, among which the cavalry was the most devastating contingent, deep into Burma to plunder and destroy.<sup>22</sup>

We are not concerned here however with Garib Niwāz's military exploits, great though these undoubtedly were, but with the process of Hinduizing which was carried on during his reign. His attitude to religion was indeed no less energetic than his attitude to warfare. Under his rule Hinduism became established as the state religion, and strong measures were taken against those who violated its tabus. On the other hand his attitude to the traditional *lāi* was curiously vacillating, alternately banishing and destroying and then reinstating them. There are also allusions to the punishment of

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and dates recorded in the CK from AD 667 to the time of Garib Niwāz. I have followed here the dating of the CK, in giving the year of his accession as 1631 sak. (AD 1709; Pemberton, Gait and Harvey give it as 1714). Equally there is no support whatever for the contention of McCulloch (1859:6) repeated by Brown (1874:22), Gait (1963:322) and the *Imperial Gazetteer* (1908: vol. 17, 186) that Mayāmba was of Naga origin, and still less to justify Hodson's assertion (1901:79) in this connection that it was the custom for all the king's sons except those of the principal queen to be put to death. That there was a rumour that Garib Niwāz was a hillman seems likely in view of its widespread occurrence in English writers: this may probably be explained however in that he was brought up away from the palace in the house of his mother, whose name, according to the Chronicle, was Ningthin Chāibi of Uchiwa. It is also possible that the rumours of his Naga origin were spread by his religious opponents. (W. Yumjao Singh 1966: 121).

21 Charai Rongba's daughter (sister or half-sister of Garib Niwāz) had apparently been slighted by the Burmese king after their marriage. Before his death Charai Rongba is said to have urged his son to avenge this insult. On the other hand the Burmese sources attributed Garib Niwāz's attacks to the fanatical religious belief that by bathing in the Irrawady he would gain merit. (Pemberton 1835: 39).

22 These campaigns of destruction into Burma led ultimately to the devastation of Manipur itself at the hands of Alaungpaya later in the century, and in turn to the alliance with the British and subsequent loss of sovereignty.

those of rival Hindu sects, notably the Rāmānandī and Nimbārka. It is clear that there was some opposition to the process of forcible Hinduization as carried out by Garīb Niwāz, and we shall discuss this in more detail below. It is equally possible that some of this opposition, religiously orientated though it certainly was, also had political overtones. After looking briefly at the years prior to his taking of *upanayana* we shall discuss firstly the evidence to indicate the extent of the king's commitment to Chaitanya Vaishṇavism, and then deal with his opposition to the traditional *lāi* on the one hand, and to other schools of Vaishṇavism on the other.

In the seven years preceding the taking of the sacred thread by Garīb Niwāz there is little in the *CK* to indicate any very great commitment to Hinduism. It is true that a temple to Kālī was erected (probably replacing the one which had collapsed during the reign of Charai Rongba), and there is an allusion to the cremation of those who had perished in battle. But meat eating was at this time not forbidden<sup>23</sup> and the ancient *lāi* continued to occupy an important place in religious life. Most prominent among these was Lāiwā Hāibā. A stone was placed in Leishāngkhong for him in 1710 A. D. This deity was the beneficiary of a pond and a temple in 1715 A. D., and two years later a maiden of the royal house was escorted to him in marriage.<sup>24</sup>

It was in this year that the king took *upanayana* :

'In 1639 sak. [1717 A. D.] in the month of Mera, (September/October) towards the end of the month, some, including the king, took the sacred thread from Guru Gopal Das.' (*CK* p. 66)<sup>25</sup>

This marked the beginning of the period of forcible Hinduization in which not only were the Hindu gods afforded royal

23 *CK* p. 62 'In Lamda, (February-March) on the 26th day, Friday, Howbam Salungba prepared meat at Kokchāi. The King and queen went also to hunt.'

24 *CK* pp. 64, 66.

25 On *upanayana* see especially Kane 1930 II/I: chapter VII, and more briefly B. Walker (1968 II: 498-501).

support but those who offended against Hindu ritual were also punished. There are some problems in dealing with the progress of Hinduism during this period however. While royal support for Vaishṇavism continued unabated until the end of Garib Niwāz's reign, the exact relationship between the Vaishṇava sects is problematic. It seems fairly certain, however, that the school of Vaishṇavism which the king accepted and supported throughout his reign, was that of Chaitanya. This is accepted by most Manipuri authorities,<sup>26</sup> and is also supported, as we shall note below, by the active persecution of rival Vaishṇava sects.

The Guru Gopal Das, having initiated the king, returned to his place of origin three years later.<sup>27</sup> But other Brahmins arrived to continue his work of proselytizing, and the new faith progressed apace. In the following year the foundations of a temple of Krishna were laid, and it was duly dedicated in 1732 A. D. At the same time strict measures were taken against those who offended against Hindu dietary laws : consumers of the flesh of cows and of other meat were severely punished<sup>28</sup>—a far cry from the situation only ten years earlier. Edicts were also proclaimed forbidding the keeping of unclean animals (pigs) in housing areas, and soon after those who failed to comply were punished.<sup>29</sup> At the same time stronger action was taken against the traditional *lāi*. During this period certain Hindu customs began to

26 Although some e.g., Jhalajit Singh, think that he changed his allegiance during his reign to the Rāmānandī sect : see below.

27 'On 20th day of Lāngban (August/September) (in 1642) [1720 A. D.] Gopal Das went back (i. e., returned home).' *CK* p. 69. We may perhaps surmise from this that this particular guru was specially brought in to initiate the king.

28 'In 1644 sak. [1732 A.D.] in the month of Lāngban (August-September), seven *sageis* (family groups) of Keiroi and all who ate cow meat were beaten and made a public display' (*CK* p. 71). The Keiroi were servants of the king in charge of the granary.

29 *CK* pp. 72-73 'It was forbidden to keep pigs and hens in the housing areas. Those who did so were sent to the rural areas.'

'Those who kept pigs in the housing areas were fined.'

assert themselves. The *CK* (p. 73) records that in 1724 A. D. the king exhumed the bones of his ancestors and had them cremated on the banks of the Ningthee River : the choice of location was presumably in order that the ashes could then be scattered upon the waters. According to the *CK* it was from this time that cremation became the customary method of disposal of the dead.<sup>30</sup>

*Satī* was also practised in some circles, although how widespread the self-immolation of widows on their husband's funeral pyre was it is impossible to say. The fact that the *CK* singles out such acts may indicate that the practice was uncommon, and certainly *satī* has never been usual in Manipur. The first recorded instance occurred in 1725 A. D. in the year immediately after cremation became the norm :

'In the month of Inga, (May-June) on the 25th day, Thursday, Sanahal Murari died. He was cremated and two of his wives leaped onto the funeral pyre and died.'  
(p. 78)

Where *satī* is recorded in the *CK* the act was an entirely voluntary one.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile the cultic aspects of the new religion went

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30 'On 20th, Sunday, (of the month of Lamda) (February-March) the king took (the bones of) his forefathers to cremate them completely to ashes : he went to the Ningthee to do so. This was the beginning of the custom of cremation throughout the land, from that day on.' (*CK* p. 73). The Chronicle does however record an instance of the digging of graves four years later (p. 77 for 1738 A. D.) so the custom of cremation cannot have been as completely accepted as the Chronicle suggests. The Ningthee is the Manipuri name for the Chindwin River.

31 Other cases of *satī* are recorded in 1735 and 1740 A.D. There is a folk tale, set in the time of Charai Rongba, that a widow requested the king's permission to be burnt alongside her dead husband. The King decreed that she might do so if she remained throughout the night with the body on the river bank—the supposed haunt of evil spirits. The woman did so and was permitted to perish with her husband. A *pipal* tree was planted in her memory, which was called *sati khongnāng*. Another woman attempted to follow her example but retired when the flames became too hot. That *satī* was not usual at any time in Manipur is no doubt due largely to the relatively high position of women.

forward. In 1726 A. D. a large tank was excavated and images of Krishna and Kālī were placed in it,<sup>32</sup> as part of the consecration ceremonials (*CK* p. 75). As if to emphasize the supremacy of the Hindu gods, further *lāi* were destroyed by burning them in a sacred grove. At this time too the singing of *kīrtans* was also established.<sup>33</sup>

The year 1729 A. D. also marked the second occasion on which the king took the sacred thread. The repetition of this act has led some Manipuri writers to assume that the king was initiated later in his life into a different Vaishṇavite sect.<sup>34</sup> But for this there is little support. As we shall see, his attitude to rival sects was one of continued opposition, and it is difficult to suppose that the king could persecute a sect into which he himself had been initiated. It would furthermore be unusual to take *upanayana* on transferring allegiance from one Vaishṇavite sect to another. The second taking of the thread was preceded by a ritual lustration :

‘On the full moon in the month of Wakching ( December-January ), on Wednesday, the guru and the king immersed in Lilong River : on the same day the *mahāpurush* gave him the sacred thread.’ *CK* p. 78.

Eight years later the thread was taken for the third time :

‘In 1659 sak. [1737 A. D] in the month of Hiyāngei (October-November) on the full moon, on Thursday, three hundred people, including the mahārāja, took the sacred thread.’ *CK* p. 85.

The king’s action was followed by most of the people in the following year :

‘In 1660 [1738 A.D.] in the month of Ingen, (June-July)

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32 Shakespear (1913 : 415-16) records that in 1906, when this tank was drained, the images were found at the foot of the consecration post in the exact position described by the *NL*.

33 *CK* p. 78 for 1729 A. D. This at least seems to be the meaning of *isei sakpa* ; the playing of the *pena* was also established at this time [*lingba* = became an institution].

34 see e.g., Jhalajit Singh [1965 : 136] who thinks there is evidence that he became a Rāmānandī towards the end of his life.

on the 5th day, Sunday, most of the country were given the sacred thread.' *CK* p. 86.

The wording here is a little unusual : 'were given' perhaps implies some degree of coercion on the part of the king, a supposition which is supported by the opposition to Vaishṇavism of the Chaitanya school in some circles, which we shall discuss below.

We must assume that what we have on these occasions is the renewal of the sacred thread by the king, when the old and worn thread was cast into the sacrificial fire and a new cord was assumed. Such renewals were usually performed on the full moon of *Śrāvana* (July-August). While neither Wakching (December-January) or Hiyāngei (October-November) fits the usual month, it is significant that the propitious time was still felt to be the full moon. We need not assume then that the repetition of the taking of the thread implies the adoption of a new sect, which would in any case be peculiar : it may best be regarded as a renewal of the original *upanayana* initiation.

There is also evidence of the deliberate Hinduizing of the old Meitei customs. The dedication of the king's house by the guru in 1730 A.D. is one example of this :

'In the month of Mera (September-October), on the 19th, Monday, the guru and the king dedicated the house at Yāiripok' (*CK* p. 79).

Dedication of this kind is very ancient, and is still carried out in what may be assumed to be a fairly traditional manner. It takes the form of the ceremonial entry of the symbol of the deity, consisting of a small image or, more often, a stone wrapped in a cloth. This is now carried by the Brahmin who sounds a bell to announce the approach of the deity. Communal eating then takes place and the food is first offered to the deity. In earlier times no doubt it was the symbol of the traditional *lāi* which was carried. The hand-bell may be compared to that rung by the māibi at the Lāi Harāoba festival. There are several references in the earlier part of the *CK* to the dedication of buildings which antedate

any traces of Hindu influence. As one example we may cite the occasion in [1609 A.D.] (*CK* p. 23) when King Khāgamba's house was dedicated. In this instance the same term is used as is employed of Hindu dedication.<sup>35</sup> There seems clear evidence here of a pre-Hindu traditional religious festival being taken over and adapted to Hindu usage.

Further evidence of Hinduizing during this period concerns the Meitei social system. We have noted earlier that the Meiteis consisted of a federation of tribal groups, the *yeks* or *salais*. The *CK* entry for 1732 A.D. speaks of the beginning of the making of genealogies for all the land according to their *salais*. It is now the case that each *salai* has been identified with a particular Brahmin *gotra*.<sup>36</sup> Yet a third example of this same Hinduizing process appears in the entry for 1744 A. D. This was the introduction of the Hindu calendar, which included prescriptions as to the propitious times in which to perform religious rites (*CK* p. 98). We can probably assume that there were other areas besides those specifically alluded to in the Chronicle in which Hindu influence made itself felt in the adaption of traditional customs.

35 *sangaba* an earlier form of *sankaba* as used in the entry for 1730 A.D. of dedication of the king's house at Yairipok. Sometimes *hongba* is used of pre-Hindu dedication, but probably with the same implications.

36 The full list, as given by Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh [1963 : 213-14] is as follows :

<i>Yek</i>	<i>Gotra</i>
Ningthoujā	Sāndilya
Angom	Gautam [also Bharadvāja]
Moirāng	Ātreya [also Angiras]
Luwāng	Kāśyapa
Khuman	Maudgalya
Khāba	Bhāradvāja
Ngāngba	Naimisya
Changlei	Bāsisṭha

S.K. Chatterji [1962 : 39] differs slightly from the above list, giving the Angom *yek* as Kausika and the Changlei *yek* as also Bhāradvāja. We may surmise that the provision of a respectable Hindu pedigree for the *rājās*, tracing his ancestry to Brahhhubahan also dates from this period.

It is apparent that the position of the king's guru increased in importance. In 1738 A. D. for example we read of the marriage of a princess to the guru, and two years later he is found, in company with the king and the king of Pong, at the boat race festivities :

'In the month of Ingen\* (June-July), on the 19th day, Monday, the king of Pong and his wife arrived ; they were made to stay at Karthong. On the new moon, Friday, the *lāi* was given a boat, as was the guru, the King and Queen of Pong, and the King. They had a boat race,' (CK p. 88). The result of this fascinating contest is not recorded. The boat race was, like house dedication, an ancient custom in Manipur. It was apparently introduced during the reign of Khāgamba, and was an occasion of considerable religious, as well as social, significance. Here also then Hinduism, in the person of the king's guru, had invaded what once had been the domain of the *lāi* alone.

It was not simply that traditional customs were being adapted. There are a number of indications that specifically Hindu practices were being widely accepted. One case in point is that of bathing in the Ganges. In 1735 A. D. and again in 1744 A. D. there are allusions to Manipuris making the journey to the Ganges to immerse themselves in its waters (CK pp. 83 and 98).<sup>37</sup> Further, the king himself submitted to the Hindu rite of cleansing ( *praichit*, Skt. *prayaschitta* ) on account of the accidental death of a Brahmin woman<sup>38</sup>. Even more significant is the statement about the king's own religious life in 1739 A. D. :

In the month of Inga (May-June), on the fifth day, a Tuesday, (some) including the king took *pramartha* (i. e., paramār-

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37 The second occasion concerned the princess married to the guru in 1738 A.D.

38 'In the month of Lamda [February-March], on the 28th day, Friday, [some] including the king were forgiven their sins for killing a Brahmin woman by burning while attacking the Burmese.' CK p. 88. The woman had presumably been trapped when Manipuri troops had fired a village.



tha)'.<sup>39</sup> (*CK* p. 87) It is not clear just how far this involved a withdrawal from affairs of state. There is certainly enough evidence of political involvement after this date ( including the attack deep into Burma soon afterwards ) to indicate that Garīb Niwāz did not—at least at this stage—become a sannyāsin. However it may well be that the beginnings of the ascetic ideal were planted at this time.

The last years of his reign seem to have been marked by several attempts to resuscitate the ancient religion, to which we shall allude in more detail below. Whatever the facts of the matter, Garīb Niwāz abdicated in favour of his son Chit Sai in 1748 A. D., and retired to Ramnagar, very possibly as a sannyāsin. The new king was not satisfied with this and proceeded to hound his father out of the land. Chit Sai was the first son of the principal queen, but not the eldest son. The eldest was Shyām Sai, who accompanied his father into exile and perished with him.

In the following year Garīb Niwāz moved to Burma, but made preparations to return to Manipur. Chit Sai took the remarkable step of declaring his father an outcaste, and in December 1751 A. D. sent a party to meet him near the Chindwin. Here Garīb Niwāz and his whole party, which included his eldest son Shyām Sai and the ex-king's guru, were treacherously murdered.<sup>40</sup> Whether or not Chit Sai approved of his father's advocacy of Chaitanyaite Vaishṇavism we are not told. It may be significant however that immediately after the abdication of Garīb Niwāz the Chronicle mentions a persecution of orthodox Hindus,<sup>41</sup> which could possibly indicate

39 The actual text gives *pramartha*, which can only be a scribal error for *paramartha*, attaining *mokṣha* by means of asceticism.

40 McCulloch [1859 : 8] is incorrect at this point : Garīb Niwāz abdicated in favour of his son ; Chit Sai did not usurp the throne. Nor is there any evidence to support the view that Garīb Niwāz went to Burma to gain support for an attempt to regain the throne. McCulloch seems to be following Pemberton [1835 : 40].

41 The persecution was directed against those who were strong ritualists and who kept caste. Here it may be pointed out that caste has never had any significant influence among the Meiteis. When they

that Chit Sai ( like Labanyachandra later ) tried to reverse the religious polices of his father (CK p. 106). But by this time it was impossible to hold back the tides of the new faith. Hinduism was firmly established as a state religion, and its position was almost impregnable.

Let us now go back over the reign of Garīb Niwāz and examine the opposition to Chaitanyaite Vaishṇavism which had to be overcome before the new faith became supreme. Opposition came, as we have already noted, from two sides : from the rival Vaishṇavite sects on the one hand, and from the protagonists of the traditional religion on the other.

Two rival Vaishṇavite sects are mentioned during this period, the tenets of which we have already discussed : these were the Nimandī sect (followers of Nimbarka) and the Rāmānandīs. The two brief allusions to the former simply record persecutions of its followers. These persecutions occurred in 1740 and again in 1742 A. D. In the second case the punishment consisted of sending the dissenters to Loi, a traditional punishment which by now had the connotation of outcasting.<sup>42</sup> There seems little reason to believe that these acts were anything else than the zealous attempt of a new convert to promulgate his own faith and silence its rivals.

The allusions to the Rāmānandī school are rather more enigmatic. It must first be observed that Garīb Niwāz apparently had no quarrel with the worship of Rām. Not only did he himself worship Rām and Lakshmi after his successful defeat of Tippera (CK p. 83 for 1734 A. D.) but he also seems to have had a special regard for Hanumān, the monkey-god and ally of Rām. From one of the stones

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accepted Hinduism all were assigned to the Kshatriya caste. Apart from the non-Meitei Loi there are no low or outcastes in Manipur. As Shakespear remarks [1910b] in the strict sense 'it can hardly be said that caste exists in Manipur'.

42 CK p. 92. The names Chaitanya and Narottam, which occur among those listed as outcasted, seem curious when given to members of a rival sect. That such names were now common among the Meiteis however indicates the general acceptance of Chaitanyaite Vaishṇavism itself.

which stood in the market place he hewed out an image of this god, and he also erected the imposing temple in his honour on the banks of the Imphal River (*CK* p. 77 for 1729 A. D.). There is furthermore a strong tradition that some at least of the cantos of the *Rāmāyana* were translated into Manipuri at this time. It cannot be the case therefore that it was the actual deities of Rāmānandī school to which the king objected. Why then did he persecute this sect ?

There are, in all, three references to the persecution of the Rāmānandīs. The first two occasions (in 1731 A. D. and 1734 A. D., *CK* pp. 79, 83)<sup>43</sup> merely mention the fact and give us no further information. The incident in 1736 A. D. is more detailed :

‘In the month of Inga (May-June), on the 2nd day, Monday, all the followers of Rāmānandī were punished : all the Brahmīns were sent back to the land of the Mayangs ; all the princes, brothers of the king, were deposed from the positions, most (of their followers) were sent to prison’. (*CK* p. 84)

We have already suggested that the persecutions cannot have been simply on religious grounds. The fact that the princes were among those punished on the last occasion may perhaps indicate that the Rāmānandī party had political as well as religious aims, perhaps even aiming to overthrow the king himself. It may be recalled in this connection that the Moamāris, who rebelled against their Śākta overlords, causing such havoc in Assam at a slightly later period, were also strongly politically motivated. However this may be, the punishment, if a palace coup was attempted, was relatively mild ; the Brahmīns involved were exiled, the princes deposed and the commoners imprisoned. No one apparently lost his life—which contrasts sharply with the period of internecine strife which was ushered in by the murder of Garīb Niwāz himself.

It seems best to interpret the scanty evidence then as

<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that this incident took place in the same year in which Garīb Niwāz himself worshipped Rām.

indicating that the king was as much motivated by political as by religious factors in his persecutions of the Rāmānandī sect. At any rate, he seems to have dealt with the sect so effectively that it never again became a significant factor in Manipur.

Finally we must examine the attitude of Garīb Niwāz to the traditional Meitei religion. Here we are faced with a number of apparent inconsistencies of attitude and conduct. The *lāi* were sometimes alternately destroyed and reinstated, apparently without rhyme or reason, sometimes also over a very short period. His actions in this regard merit a closer investigation.

Before taking *upanayana* we have seen that Garīb Niwāz paid due respect to the Meitei *lāi*. Prominent among these was the *lāi* Lāiwā Hāibā. Indeed so frequent is the mention of this deity throughout the reign that it provides a helpful test case in the examination of the attitude of the king towards the *lāi* in general. We shall therefore list below, in chronological order, the fate of this god :

- 1710 A stone erected for Lāiwā Hāibā at Leishāngkhong.
- 1715 Dedication of a pond for Lāiwā Hāibā.
- 1715 Dedication of a temple to Lāiwā Hāibā.
- 1717 A princess married to Lāiwā Hāibā ( taking of the thread ).
- 1717 Lāiwā Hāibā carried in procession on a palanquin.
- 1721 Foundations laid of a building ( temple ? ) for Lāiwā Hāibā.
- 1726 Lāiwā Hāibā and other *lāi* destroyed by burning.
- 1729 Lāiwā Hāibā reinstated.
- 1730 An Angom maiden married to Lāiwā Hāibā.
- 1731 Dedication of a temple and a stone to Lāiwā Hāibā.
- 1732 Another temple built to Lāiwā Hāibā.
- 1732 Lāiwā Hāibā made unclean ( i. e., outcasted ).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> This is the last we hear of him unless, as some Manipuri informants suggest, he is to be identified with the *Lāi* Fallou Khomba who was reinstated in 1733 A. D. I think this unlikely.

This changing attitude to the *lāi* is extremely puzzling. Light might be thrown on the question if we knew exactly who Lāiwā Hāibā was, but the last banishment of the god was so effective that today he is not worshipped and scarcely remembered. The name literally means 'he who speaks the word of the *lāi*' ( *wā* = word, *hāibā* = to speak ), from which we may assume him, to have been an oracular deity of some kind. If this is so it is likely that he was associated with the *māibās* and *māibīs*. In this case the changing fortunes of the god could well reflect the changing status of the traditional priests and priestesses, who, in their role as representatives of the ancient faith, would come into conflict with Vaishṇavism to some extent. This conflict would become especially acute when it came to gaining the favour of king himself. Until the time of the introduction of Hinduism the *māibās* and *māibīs* would have had the monopoly as advisors to the king. With the appointment of the guru as preceptor to the king this monopoly would be broken, and the influence of the traditional priests and priestesses would be so much the less. We may consequently expect that there was a conflict between these representatives of the ancient faith and those of the new on a political as well as a religious level. This interpretation finds support in the comment of Hodson :

'At first the decrees of the king (i. e., to adopt Vaishṇavism) received little obedience ; the opposition to the change centred mainly round the numerous members of the royal family who were supported, not unnaturally, by the *māibās*, the priests of the old religion.' (1910 : 94)

It is clear enough that quite fierce attempts were made during Garīb Niwāz's reign to destroy certain of the traditional *lāi* at various times. In 1723 A. D., for example, nine *lāi* were destroyed, together with their temples. This action was so effective that the *CK* comments tersely 'the *lāi* ceased to be' (p. 72). Three years later further *lāi* were gathered and burnt in a grove. They were then buried near the place where the temple of Hanumān was subsequently built (*CK* p. 75 for 1726 A. D.). On the evidence of the Chronicles the king's attitude

to the traditional *lāi* seems to have been one of hostility, tempered with the occasional act of clemency.

The impression of the general opposition on the part of the king to the traditional *lāi* is supported by other sources outside the Chronicles. Jhalajit Singh (1965 : 138) agrees with Hodson that Vaishṇavism encountered strong opposition from the adherents of the old religion. Shakespear also noted (1913 : 414) that the spread of Hinduism was slow 'and achieved only by a compromise with the ancient faith'. He attributed this opposition in part to the strict dietary laws imposed by the Brahmins, which evidently found little sympathy among the bulk of the Meiteis, accustomed as they were to consuming meat and strong drink. There is also a tradition<sup>45</sup> that Garīb Niwāz tried to expunge the old faith by burning a number of sacred books concerning the Meitei religion.

It seems likely that the king did not attempt to destroy the traditional religion entirely, for this would have been an impossible task. There is evidence that he tried to bring some at least of the old gods under the cultic control of the Brahmins, perhaps with the object of reducing the importance of the *māibās* and *māibīs* while at the same time avoiding the direct destruction of the greater *lāi*. Fairly soon after taking *upanayan*, after the first mass destruction of some of the *lāi* in 1723 A. D., he also appointed Brahmins to initiate the worship of four other *lāi*.<sup>46</sup> This appears to be an attempt to bring traditional deities into the Hindu pantheon. The two greatest of the *lāi* involved in this attempt, Lainingthou Nongsaba and the goddess Pānthoibi, did not survive long in their new Hinduized form, for they were destroyed along with other gods in the purge of 1726 A. D. But another, Tāibang Khāiba, at least survived for we read of a fire in his 'kitchen' right at the end of Garīb Niwāz's reign (*CK* p. 90). Hinduism has never been an exclusive religion, and there would be nothing unusual either in adopting traditional deities into the

45 See Khelachandra Singh (1969).

46 The *lāi* involved were Lainingthou Nongsaba, Yimthei *Lāi*, Pānthoibi and Tāibang Khāiba [*CK* p. 72 for 1723 A.D.]

Hindu pantheon or in giving them a respectable Brahmanical priesthood ; nor could there be any objection to identifying *lāi* with Hindu gods, as happened at a later date with Pānthoibi herself. The king then probably attempted to bring about a syncretism of this kind while at the same time removing those *lāi* which he could.

It should be noted however that the king remained, by virtue of his position, the head of the old religion ; it is therefore altogether unlikely that he tried to repudiate it entirely, and the evidence discussed above does not suggest that he did so. The concept that the king was above the priests was further carried into the new faith of Vaishṇavism. It must be stressed that at no time did Garīb Niwāz ( or any other king ) become entirely subservient to the Brahmins. He not only retained full powers over affairs of state, but also on several occasions seems to have exercised control over religious matters. It was, for example, (and this continued to be the case until the abolition of the kingship) the king, and not the Brahmins, who gave caste to his subjects, and it was only he who could, by banishment to Loi, take it away. Again, if we accept the story of Charai Rongba's action towards the widow who wished to become *sati*, this action also had to be sanctioned by the king. Again there is at least one occasion on which Garīb Niwāz ( with the support of the guru, it is true ) ruled against the Brahmin community in refusing them permission to encroach on the profession of the Meitei astrologer.<sup>47</sup> The introduction of a new religion into Manipur did not change the position of the king, who was always above the priests in religious as well as secular matters.

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47 'In 1651 sak. [1729 A.D.] in the month of Inga [May-June], on the 24th day of the month, Monday, the Brahmins wanted to take over the profession of the *konoks* [astrologers]. Brahmin Keilambar Miśra's descendents taught the unlearned astrology. King Garīb Niwāz and the mahāpurush ordered them not to do so, as it was not the profession of the Brahmins. Most of the Brahmins tried to go to Burma, but they were stopped in Wangching [December-January] and turned back.' [CK p. 77]

This account of religious policies of Garīb Niwāz requires a postscript. In the last two or three years of his reign there are more references in the Chronicles than one would expect to the traditional *lāi* and to incidents which would have been contrary to Hindu custom. This suggests either that Garīb Niwāz himself relaxed in his attitude to the *lāi* or else that there was a revival of opposition in some circles to the king's religious policies. The first alternative seems altogether unlikely, both in view of the possibility that he became a sannyasin towards the end of his life, but also because his guru was his companion right up to the time of his death. In favour of the second alternative we may point out that Garīb Niwāz did, for some reason, abdicate, and that his son Chit Sai seems to have been sufficiently out of harmony with his father to have had him murdered. In addition we have referred earlier to the persecution of orthodox Hindus which took place after the abdication. What are the indications of a reaction against Hinduism in the last years of Garīb Niwāz's reign?

The evidence is two-fold ; firstly the allusions to the great *lāi* Pākhangbā, the ancestral deity of the Meiteis, and secondly to the disregard of dietary laws. There are two references to Pākhangbā, both of them extremely puzzling :

'In 1667 sak. (1745 A. D.) in the month of Lāngbān, (August-September), on the 3rd day, the four *panas* began to cut wood for the king's palace. On the same day they laid the foundations. On the 6th day, Wednesday, Pākhangbā, in the form of a *khaorou*,<sup>48</sup> fell down from the sky in front of the cloth'. (CK p.99)

'In 1669 sak, (1747 A. D.) in the month of Kālen (April-May), on the 23rd day, Wednesday, Lāiningthou Pākhangbā went down to Hanching and ascended the throne' (CK p. 105)

According to popular belief Pākhangbā appears in the form of a snake, its size determining whether the omen is good or evil. The sudden appearance of the cobra at the foundation laying

48 *khaorou* for *kharou*, a cobra.



was taken as a theophany of this kind. Whether there is any direct connection between this and the crowning of the *lāi* later is not clear. But references to Lāiningthou Pākhangbā during this period are relatively rare in the Chronicle and some connection between the two incidents seems quite possible. If this is so the crowning may be seen as a direct consequence of the appearance of the god. What was actually involved is not clear, but formal crowning of the most ancient *lāi* which is connected with the founding of the Meitei nation has all the appearances of an attempt formally to reestablish the supremacy of the traditional gods.

That this interpretation does not read too much into the text finds some support in the way in which Hindu restrictions on wine and meat were to some extent disregarded during this period, in one instance by the queen herself. In this case an important traditional *lāi* was again involved :

‘In ( 1668 sak. ) 1746 A.D. the first day of Lāngban ( August-September ) was a Wednesday. On that very day Phamdao wished to drink wine, so some was first offered to Sanāmahi. On the 20th day of Lāngban ( August-September ), Monday, Pukhranba Senāpati died. The Naichas<sup>49</sup> wished to drink wine, and so both of them offered wine. On the 26th day, Sunday, the queen and the ladies of the royal household dressed up ( in their finery ) and drank wine to Sanāmahi in the market place”. ( *CK* p. 102 ).

In this passage wine was offered to Sanāmahi on three successive occasions. Such a practice is nowhere before mentioned, and it is not the custom to drink wine to Sanāmahi at the present time. This looks like a formal and, in the case of the women of the court, public protest against Hindu restrictions and the neglect of the traditional *lāi*. The public worship of Sanāmahi is the more remarkable since he is regarded throughout Manipur as a specifically household deity. The allusion to the eating of beef is briefer (*CK* 103 for 1746).

49 Naichas = two *panas*, Ahallup and Nāhārup.

A. D., and simply records that the servant of one Yumnām Tena did so. It is significant though, in the light of the earlier punishment of meat-eaters during Garīb Niwāz's reign, that no mention of such retribution is mentioned here.

It is not possible to say from this evidence how far such protests against Vaishṇavism went during the last years of Garīb Niwāz's reign, or how widespread they were. It seems justifiable however to see in these actions a certain degree of religious rebellion which may have been one factor in the abdication of the king.

With the murder of Garīb Niwāz the records become less concerned with the religion of the realm than with its politics. The instigator of the crime, Chit Sai, was banished from the land, and his younger brother installed on the throne by popular acclaim. Perhaps the Hindu party had reasserted itself, gaining support from the sympathy felt at the murder of the late king. One at least of Garīb Niwāz's sons, Anantashai, was sufficiently in harmony with his father's religion to have a *Śrāddha* performed for him and to bring the frontal bone back to Manipur for burial.

(d) *Bhāgyachandra : The Consolidation of Hinduism*

The death of Garīb Niwāz ushered in a period of confusion and decline. Three kings followed each other in rapid succession until in 1759 A. D., the reigning king abdicated in favour of Jai Singh, who is more commonly known by his adopted name of Bhāgyachandra.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile the political situation had become complicated by the resurgence of Burmese power under Alaungpaya and his successors. It was natural enough that Manipur which, in the previous decades, had devastated Burma, should become the object of Burmese attentions. The country was attacked and overrun no less than three times during the period of Bhāgyachandra's reign, and on each occasion the Burmese placed a puppet king on the throne. The main reason for the failure of the

<sup>50</sup> His Maripuri name was Chingthang Khomba.

Manipuris during this period was no doubt the use of firearms by their opponents, which drastically reduced the effectiveness of the formerly invincible Manipuri cavalry. It is no small credit to the persistence of Bhāgyachandra that despite these odds he managed, with some help from the Ahom kings, to topple these puppet kings and reinstate himself.

Despite these depredations Bhāgyachandra managed not only to confirm Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism as the state religion but also to introduce certain innovations into the religious life. At the same time the indigenous gods were not neglected. After the initial shock of the forcible introduction of the new faith the situation seems to have settled, and some kind of *modus vivendi* between the two religions was reached. Sanāmahi, the household deity, continued to be worshipped and to play an important part in the cultic life of king and people. His image was erected in 1778 A. D. (CK p. 118) and in the following year a second image was dedicated during the rebuilding of the palace. Again in 1788 A. D. not only was an elephant offered to him, presumably for ceremonial purposes, but we also read that in that year the king and queen 'ate fruit to Sanāmahi' (CK p. 140). The exact implication of this is not very clear, but it is significant that the days when wine was drunk to Sanāmahi seem to be in the past. The worship of the Meitei household *lāi* had evidently become Hinduized in this respect. The acceptance of Sanāmahi among and alongside the Hindu deities is well illustrated by an incident in 1783 A. D.

'On 5th Hiyangei (October-November) Saturday, Ibungsi (i. e., the king's brother's son) Anantashai Nōngthōnba started to dedicate the tank. On the same day *lāi* Govinda, Sanāmahi and others, all the *lāi* of the land, were made to bathe in the Lamlongei tank. The King, Queen, all the leaders, the Rāmānandīs, monks and Brahmīns, the old men, and men of rank—all of them were made to bathe in the tank'.<sup>51</sup> (C. K. p. 127)

51 The passage continues: 'There was a feast; the King and Queen

There are only two explicit references to the traditional *lāi* besides Sanāmahi during this period. One of these (*CK* p. 133 for 1786 A.D.) merely records that the goddess Pānthoibi was made unclean (outcasted). The other is extremely obscure, and refers to a *lāi* seldom mentioned elsewhere :

'In the year 1716 sak. (1794 A.D.), on the 17th Lamda, (February-March) Monday, Kaborambu Senāpati, disobeyed Parkhong *Lāi* and carried out an attack : many people were killed. He was sent to Moirāng.' (*CK* p. 156)

We can only surmise from this that the general in question attempted to attack an enemy (presumably Burma) against the express command of the *lāi* as delivered through the *māibī*. The disastrous results vindicated the oracle's warning and the Senāpati was punished accordingly.

In contrast to this meagre information about the Meitei *lāi*, that on the Hinduism of the period is fairly generous. Hindus from outside Manipur continued to arrive. The *Bāmon Khunthok* records the arrival of Brahmins, some from as far afield as Lahore and Vrindaban, while the *CK* also mentions sannyāsīs (*CK* p. 122 for 1780 A.D.) The Rāmānandī school was still active and seems to have been less the object of persecution that it was in Garīb Niwāz's time. The arrival of Rāmānandīs is mentioned on more than one occasion (see *CK* p. 129 for 1784 and 1792 A.D. : compare also on 1783 A.D. above), and the king himself erected an image to Rām shortly before going on his pilgrimage. The hold of Hinduism is emphasised in the frequent references to the taking of the sacred thread (e. g., *CK* for 1781 and

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sang songs and danced. The King offered silver and gold, and gave cloths ; he gave the Queen gold and silver and foreign clothes called shawls. On the 7th, Sunday, they gave a feast for the prince and many Brahmins, including the caste Vaishṇavis. On the 8th, Monday, all the servants, the watchers of the houses, were given food. They gave the ambassadors, from Tripura meat and *yu*, but to those in the street they gave milk and molasses.' While meat and wine were not withheld from the non-Hindu visitors the common people were fed on vegetarian food.

1794 A.D.). That this was regarded as more than a formality is seen in the fact that the king's personal bodyguard were expected to be familiar with the sacred liturgy which accompanied the rite, for in 1788 A.D. (*CK* p. 140) one guard was dismissed for being ignorant of the *gāiatrī*. Hindu customs and restrictions had by now become generally accepted. Wine drinking seems to have been a capital crime.<sup>52</sup> Those who ate meat were obliged to undergo a purificatory rite (*CK* for 1789 A. D., p. 142), while for killing a cow the punishment was exile to *Loi* (*CK* for 1795 A. D., p. 158).

The dominant type of Vaishṇavism remained that of the Chaitanyaite school. This is indicated not only by the general features of the religious life of the period but also by the references to saints and gods associated with Chaitanya himself. There are, for example, two allusions to the making of images of Nityānanda Prabhu, the brother of the saint. The fact that these occur in succeeding years (1794 and 1795 A.D., *CK* pp. 156, 158) may perhaps indicate that this cult, which is still very much carried on in Manipur, began about this time. There are also two references to Jagannātha, both of which however are rather difficult to interpret. As Kane points out (1930 IV 702) there is a close connection between Chaitanya and Jagannātha, partly because the saint settled at Puri, where he came to be worshipped as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Kane also finds some evidence that Chaitanya was, in some circles, identified with Jagannātha also. The allusions to Jagannātha in the *CK* therefore no doubt indicate the growing hold of the Chaitanya cult. One reference (*CK* for 1784 A. D., p. 130) merely records the exile of a certain family for stealing gold from Jagannātha.<sup>53</sup> The second is more significant :

'In 1699 sak. (1777 A. D.) the king and others became beggars for seven days on the command of Jagannāth Prabhu.' (*CK* p. 177)

52. *CK* for 1781 A. D. p. 123, In this case however the punishment was commuted.

53 Here spelt *Jakannāth*, which is most probably a scribal error.

The idea of renouncing the world for a period is not of course unusual, and the concepts of begging and of almsgiving were common enough from Vedic times, and became a special feature of Buddhism. What is unusual is that kings were usually the bestowers rather than the receivers of such gifts.

Vaishṇavite forms of worship continued, and there are several references to the holding of *kīrtans*.<sup>54, 55</sup>

Probably the most significant feature of Bhāgyachandra's reign was in this very sphere of religious ceremonial. This was in the introduction of the *Rās Lilā*. The *Rās* was based on the older traditional dances, specifically on the *Lāi Harāoba*. It was the genius of Bhāgyachandra that transformed this traditional ritual into the stylized dance which was to become one of the classical schools of Indian dance. Tradition has it that Kṛishṇa appeared to the king in a dream, dressed as a cowherd, and commanded him to construct an image. Whatever the truth of the legend, it is certain that the image was constructed and enthroned at Kanchipur in Mera (September-October) 1779 A. D. It is significant also that the *CK* refers to it as an image of Govinda, that is Kṛishṇa in his cowherd aspect. In the same month the *Rās Lilā* was performed, and lasted for five days. There can be

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54 One of these, that held for Kālarāja, the king's brother in 1795 A. D. seems to have been as part of a Śrāddha ceremony.

55 It should be noted that during this period the singing was in Bengali. The Bengali script had replaced the ancient Meitei script during the time of Garīb Niwāz, and had become, together with Sanskrit, the religious language of Manipuri Vaishṇavism. The *Kīrtans* were composed in Bengali, not in the vernacular, and this continued until quite recently, when the revival of interest in Manipuri led to its use as the language of religion once again. The same applied to the lyrics of the *Rās Lilā*, and indeed according to some Manipuri sources it was even considered sacrilegious to use the vernacular in worship. This led to the situation—which is familiar enough in the history of religions—of the language of worship being often not understood by the worshippers. It also incidentally served to underline the foreign origins of Vaishṇavism in Manipur, and reactions against Vaishṇavism during recent times have been as much against this foreignness as against its religious basis.

little doubt that Bhāgyachandra did play an important part in the formation of the *Rās Līlā*, which thereafter became an important aspect of Manipuri religious art, and extended its influence throughout the whole of the sub-continent.<sup>56</sup>

Towards the end of his reign the desire for asceticism returned. In 1797 A. D., Bhāgyachandra set off on a pilgrimage to visit places sacred to the Kṛishṇa cult on the Ganges.<sup>57</sup> A tradition has it that the cause of the pilgrimage was the execution of a Brahmin for a crime. The execution is said to have been carried out without the knowledge of the king, and against the Śāstric injunction that no Brahmin should be put to death (Jhalajit Singh 1965 : 175), although the Chronicle has a rather different version of this incident. Whatever the exact cause of the pilgrimage, Bhāgyachandra and a considerable retinue journeyed by way of Cachar, Sylhet and Agartala to Nabadwip. He did not reach Vrindaban, but died near Murshidabad in Langbam (October) 1798 A. D. Bhāgyachandra had reigned for forty years, during which time the land had been devastated three times by the Burmese. Despite these setbacks Bhāgyachandra had put his stamp on Manipuri religion, bringing his own particular genius into the Vaishṇavite worship of Kṛishṇa.

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56 Enakshi Bhavnani (1970 : 66) points out that the techniques of the *Rās* were codified by the gurus, who used the existing dance traditions. She suggests that the *Mahā Rās*, the *Vasanta Rās*, and the *Kunj Rās* were certainly formulated during Bhāgyachandra's reign, as well as the *Bhangt Pareng Achouba* which is an important part of the *Rās Līlā* dances as a whole.

57 The whole pilgrimage is recorded in the short Manipuri book *Chingihang Khomba Maharaj Ganga Chatpa*, which seems to be a fairly factual account of it.

## CHAPTER X

### THE SYNTHESIS : THE MODERN PERIOD

To all appearances the reign of Bhāgyachandra had ended in the establishment of Vaishṇavism as the religion of Manipur once and for all. Although there had been no systematic attempt to destroy all the traditional *lāi*, certain of them had been purged, and Hinduism clearly had been given royal patronage. The old religion however was not yet finally dead : the new king Labanyachandra made one last attempt to get rid of the imported faith. The *OK* seems to imply that the desolation of the land by the Burmese was not unconnected with the introduction of new gods. At any rate Labanyachandra made a last attempt to reestablish those deities which had previously been declared unclean.<sup>1</sup>

‘In order to reestablish the land and palace, which had been desolate for thirty-five years, he made his brother-in-law set up again the groves and the sacred places which had been destroyed.’ (*CK* for 1798 A. D., p. 165)

This was followed by the erection of an image to Sanāmahī, the ancestral *lāi*, and by a visit to Lansoibi for the express purpose of worshipping the *lāi* (*CK* pp. 166, 168). The revival was short lived. Labanyachandra was assassinated in that same year—whether from a political motive or from a religious one we cannot be sure. Henceforth there was no further attempt to destroy Hinduism in Manipur; nor, on the Hindu side, were the traditional *lāi* actively persecuted. The uneasy coexistence of the two faiths which had characterized the preceding century became stabilized into a certain pattern, acceptable to both sides.

This religious synthesis may be regarded as having three aspects. On the one side certain of the *lāi*—those which do not appear previously to have had any very great significance

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<sup>1</sup> This was not the action of a youthful enthusiast : the king was at this time 44 years old.



—seem to have been allowed to pass into oblivion. No doubt some lesser important *lāi*, especially clan or household gods,<sup>2</sup> continued to be worshipped in the usual way as at present. But the public *lāi*, those which were the common property of all the Meiteis, became fewer. We may imagine that those *lāi* which had a strong cultic or emotional hold on the people were the ones which were able to withstand the rival claims of the Hindu gods and to retain their place in the life of the people. Little is heard in the period under discussion of those obscure and enigmatic *lāi* which crop up from time to time in the earlier part of the Chronicle. It is the *lāi* of central importance, such as the ancestral god Pākhangbā and the household deity Sanāmahi, which are most frequently mentioned during this period. The principal guardians of the directions, Thāngjing, Mārjing, Wāngbaren and Koubru, are also fairly prominent, as are the two deities associated with the romantic popular legend, Nongpok Ningthou and Pānthoibi. The Meitei pantheon had evidently been pruned, whether deliberately or by a process of natural selection, and only the important *lāi* survived at a time when competition from the Hindu gods for the devotion of the people became acute.

The second aspect of the synthesis is one familiar in the history of Hinduism, namely the facility of the Hindu gods to absorb and to become identified with traditional deities. S. K. Chatterji has remarked in this connection that during the advance of Hinduism into Dravidian country the old deities were all identified as a matter of course with the gods of the Vedic and early Brahmanical pantheon and that non-Aryan ritual language was also taken over (1967 : 19). The process of identification was then by no means novel. There are a few examples of this in the Hinduization of Meitei religion. Pānthoibi, the goddess of romantic legend, has gradually become identified with Durgā. The identification of Nongpok

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<sup>2</sup> i. e., the *lāi* of the *yeks* and the *yumjāo lāi*, which are still accorded worship today.

'Ningthou with Śiva is rather later and has only recently become fully established. These are examples (of which perhaps, the most outstanding in the history of Hinduism is of course Kṛishṇa himself) of a local god becoming absorbed in a Hindu deity and in part transferring his original attributes to that god.

The third aspect was the Hinduizing of aspects of the traditional cultus : by this is meant that traditional *lāi* came to be worshipped according to Hindu ritual prescriptions (for example in the substitution of bloodless offerings for animal sacrifices). Another side to this process was in the transference of ritual functions between the priests of both religions.

By this period also Brahmins had been assimilated ; they were no longer regarded as *mayāngs*. They had become full members of the Meitei community, so much so that marriage between outside Brahmins and Meitei woman was refused during this late period ( *CK* p. 119 ), a state of affairs which certainly did not obtain during the reign of Garīb Niwāz.

With these aspects of the synthesis in mind we shall examine the leading aspects of Manipuri religion during the modern period. If some separation between the two faiths—traditional and Hindu—is necessary in this examination this by no means implies that they were distinct and separate entities. Coexistence there certainly was, but the degree of religious synthesis evidenced in the records makes it impossible to view the religion of the period simply as two distinct faiths existing side by side. There was a much greater emphasis on integration (to use Chatterji's word) both of the Meitei *lāi* into the Hindu system and of the Hindu gods into Meitei culture. Consequently the Vaishṇavism practised in Manipur became a peculiarly Manipuri Vaishṇavism in form, adopting aspects of Meitei culture and being modified by it. Conversely the more important of the Manipuri *lāi* continued to be worshipped, often side by side with Govinda, without the degree of tension which had marked the earlier period.

(a) *The Hinduism of the Period*

The Hinduism of the period may be said to have had two main characteristics, the cultic and the legal. Cultically the worship of Vaishṇavite deities developed and deepened. Kṛishṇa, in his cowherd aspect of Śrī Govinda, had by now become the dominant deity, and the cow had attained a high importance. There are numerous references to the milk of one hundred and eight cows being offered to Govinda (see *CK* for 1903, 1906, 1908 A.D.) towards the end of our period. That this was not merely a late development may be seen from similar incidents recorded in 1796 and 1839 A.D. (*CK* p. 247). The religious importance of the cow is supported by the very strong emphasis on cow protection. There are two curious references to *praichit* for cattle which had been accidentally killed (*OK* p. 66), while the punishment for stealing cows was either exile (1867 A.D. p. 370) or public flogging (*CK* for 1853 A.D., p. 320).<sup>3</sup>

Events of importance were now conducted in the presence of the Govinda image. Dedication of public buildings (*CK* for 1854 A. D. p. 326), truth ordeals<sup>4</sup> (*OK* for 1887 A. D. p. 474), as well as the settlement of disputes between Brahmins<sup>5</sup> (*CK* for 1864 A.D. p. 360), all took place before Govinda.

Closely connected with the supremacy of Govinda was the growth in the Rādhā cult. We have already noticed the introduction of the *Rās Lilā* during the reign of Bhāgyachandra, during which the relationship of Kṛishṇa and the Gopis was enacted, and special emphasis was laid upon Rādhā as the paramour of the god. There are references to

3 The laws of cow protection extended to the European agents in Manipur: one *sāhib* (Brown) was stopped from killing a cow in 1869 (*CK* p. 388).

4 The reference concerns the question of Brahmin paternity of an illegitimate child: the unusually mild ordeal consisted of trying to catch pieces of gold and silver.

5 Probably a dispute over supremacy in religious matters: the rival parties were made to eat together before the image.

particular performances of the *Rās* during this period, and as early as 1805 A. D. the *Basanta Rās* was added. Images both of Govinda and of Rādhā continued to proliferate. There are allusions to the performance of *jīvayas* (CK for 1960, 1961, A.D. p. 444), the rite by which new images were regarded as being impregnated with life and being. Other Vaishṇavite images such as Jagannātha, Chaitanya,\* himself, and Balarām are also mentioned freely.

Vaishṇavite forms of worship seem by now to have been well established. The reading of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was common, and we also hear of reading from the *Mahābhārata*. These recitations were usually associated with extended ceremonies at which lavish gifts were distributed to Brahmins and Vaishṇavas.<sup>6</sup> One typical example took place in 1863 A. D. :

‘On 29th Wakching, Sunday, the new moon was a day of Arthadānya. The king gave offerings to Govindajī, Rāseśwari, and all the *lāi* of the land of the Meiteis; also to all the Brahmins, Thamandis, all the monks and Vaishṇavas. He offered houses, elephants, cows, gold, silver and money, grain and cloths without number .... All the nobles and high officials also offered whatever they could.’ (CK for 1863 A. D. p. 357).

\* *Kīrtāns* also continued to be held, one such taking place at the *śrāddha* for King Surchand (CK for 1895 p. 513).

It is evident from the survey that the cultic aspects of Vaishṇavism were by now well established and could no longer be seriously challenged. The cultic side was reinforced by numerous legal rulings. The protection of the cow we have already alluded to. There are also indications of a much greater emphasis on Hindu purification rites than previously. No doubt this came about partly as a result of

<sup>6</sup> This phrase occurs elsewhere in the CK, and is curious since all the Meitei were by now Vaishṇavas. Presumably some special sanctity is indicated, although it is not clear of what kind. There may be some connection with the ‘caste Vaishṇavas’ we have noticed earlier or possibly Vaishṇava *sannyāsīs* are intended.

contact with Europeans, who would necessarily be regarded as outcastes beyond the Hindu system. The earliest such reference in the *CK* notes that the king's pavillion in the polo ground had to be dismantled because it had been entered by two Europeans.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the strongest examples of legalism during this period however were in relation to sexual ethics. The writers of the Chronicle at this time seem to have had a morbid interest in adultery, abortion and miscegenation. Punishment for Meiteis who cohabited with those outside the community—Muslims, Burmese, hill tribes—was generally exile to the particular community concerned. Adultery was more harshly punished. Sometimes it involved a public beating for the man (e. g., *CK* p. 383), but more often exile to Loi; occasionally rough justice was done and the offending man murdered (e.g., *CK* p. 111). The adulterous woman was generally exposed in the market place.<sup>8</sup>

Abortion has always been regarded under Hindu law as a heinous offence, equivalent to murder. There are numerous allusions to cases of abortion during the period. Punishment varied from public exposure of the type used for adultery (e. g., *CK* p. 125) to exile, and sometimes both (e.g., *CK* p. 133). On one occasion on which both mother and child died the father involved—a Brahmin—was reduced to servant status (*CK* p. 110). The seriousness with which this particular case was viewed is shown in that an official court inquiry was made into the matter.

The inordinate concern of the writers of the Chronicle at

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<sup>7</sup> Since this incident happened in 1859 A.D. presumably McCulloch, whose first term as political agent extended from A.D. 1844 until 1862, was one of the trespassers. While in this case the cause was clearly Hindu restrictions, in a comparable incident in 1871 A. D. the reason for refusing a European (presumably Brown) permission to build a house on a particular spot was that it was the *laipham* of a traditional deity.

<sup>8</sup> The top part of the body was exposed and painted, and a crier related the crime to all at large. This punishment is mentioned by the British writers Brown and Johnstone. It is known in Manipuri as *phoub* or *khungoinaba*.

this period over sexual offences, and their unusual frequency, raise the question as to whether or not Manipuri society of the time was inclined to be more promiscuous than earlier. The punishment of exposure of one or both parties for adultery is very probably a traditional one, used in pre-Hindu times, although one does not hear of it earlier in the *GK*. It is possible that the introduction of Chaitanyaite Vaishṇavism contributed to the general slackening in sexual ethics and moral standards. McCulloch commented favourably on the widespread chastity of Manipuri women, and it seems likely that Meitei society (unlike that of certain of the hill peoples) was generally somewhat puritanical in sexual ethics. It could be that popularity of that school of Vaishṇavism which glorified Kṛishṇa's association with a mistress, Rādhā, and his frolics with the *gopīs*, as well as the growing importance of erotic religious literature in which the diversions of Kṛishṇa are described, could have been contributory factors in a decline in moral standards. There is indeed something rather anomalous in the severe penalties being meted out for adultery at a time when the literature glorifying the erotic activities of Kṛishṇa was being officially encouraged. It can perhaps be argued that the spiritual interpretation of Kṛishṇa's relationship with Rādhā was not always fully appreciated. If this is so the influence of Chaitanyaite Vaishṇavism was not altogether morally wholesome. However this may be, there was one way at least in which traditional marriage patterns were upset by the introduction of Hindu laws. In 1874 A.D., marriage was restricted between certain gotras :

'In 1796 Sak., (1874 A. D.) 2nd, Inga (May-June), Sunday, all the pibās of the Seven Salāis were called up at the Mandap of Govindajī with all the assemblies of the Brahmins Cheirāp, Garot, all the nobles and officials and the king ordered that marriages between the forbidden degrees, salāis and Gotras should not take place, as it had increased the number of widowers and caused calamity in the land.'

We have seen above that it was probably during the reign of

Garīb Niwāz when the Brahmanical system of gotras was introduced. The exact position of the restrictions on choice of a marriage partner (if there were any) in the pre-Hindu period is obscure. If we recall that in the earlier period the *yeks* were often at war with each other it seems unlikely, although not impossible, that rigid exogamy was custom.<sup>9</sup> If this were the case, prohibition of marriage between certain gotras, as well as between certain well-defined degrees of relationship, was an innovation imposed by Hindu law, rather than a mere modification of existing traditional customs.<sup>10</sup>

(b) *The Position of the Traditional Religion*

The main traditional gods referred to during this period are the ancestral deity Pākhangbā, the household *lāi* Sanāmahi, and, less frequently, the *māikei-ngākpa*, the 'guardians of the directions'. Pākhangbā is the deity alluded to most often. There are several references to appearances of the *lāi* (1848 A. D. at Santhong, 1871 A. D. at Lakhong and so on), which must presumably be taken as the appearance of snakes which were taken to represent the god. The allusion to the appearance of the palanquin of Pākhangbā is more difficult to explain.<sup>11</sup> His worship continued unmolested, and new representations of the *lāi* continued to be made and installed. There is also an interesting reference to the bringing back of Pākhangbā and of Sanāmahi from 'mayāng' to be installed in their proper places (CK 1848 A. D. p. 288).

9 However there is enough evidence from elsewhere that tribes sometimes chose wives from among their enemies that the possibility cannot be entirely ruled out. That the Ninthoujā king traditionally chose the Angom princess as his principal queen does not prove that exogamy was general.

10 On marriage restrictions see above, Chapter 5(b) n. 4.

11 CK for 1891 A. D. p. 488-89. In fact there is a marked increase in statements of this kind, which might be regarded as evidence of an increase in superstitious beliefs during the period. Other examples which may be cited are the allusions to people being carried off by a 'caterpillar' (a superstition still held in some circles today), and sundry references to *lāi* uttering noises. It may be suggested that in view of these the influence of Hinduism increased rather than lessened such superstitious beliefs.

No doubt this points to the removal of representations of these *lāi* during the Burmese devastations and their return when the political situation became more settled.

There are two main indications of the Hinduization of Pākhangbā worship during this period, the replacement of traditional methods of worship by Hindu forms, and the worship of the *lāi* in conjunction with Hindu gods. The clearest indication of the former is in the use of vegetarian foods and flower offerings. There are two examples of the first, both mentioning offerings of rice : (*CK* for 1853 A. D. p. 301 and for 1875 A. D. p. 429). The other case is more striking : here the traditional practice of drinking wine has been replaced by the drinking of flower water :

'On 6th day, Wednesday, of Wākching (December-January), pledges were taken before Grandfather Pākhangbā...by drinking the flower water of Pākhangbā.' (*CK* for 1870 A. D. p. 393)

*Leiman* (flower water now means the water used for the symbolic ritual washing of the images of Hindu gods in which the flowers which are offered are dipped. In the present context however it may imply no more than the water in which the flowers offered to Pakhangba were dipped.)

Hindu forms of worship were clearly replacing those aspects of the traditional cultus which were thought to be repugnant to Hindu piety.

Those occasions which refer to the traditional *lāi* in conjunction with the Hindu gods are significant in showing the degree of integration of traditional elements into Manipuri Hinduism. The most remarkable allusions to the *lāi* Pākhangbā and Sanāmahi all take the same form. One example of this almost stereotyped language will suffice :

'In 1769 sak. (1847 A. D.) on the 7th day of Poinu (November/December), Tuesday, blood descended before Śrī Govinda. On the 8th day, Wednesday, blood descended before Lāiningthou Sanāmahi' (*CK* p. 281).

This peculiar phrase is repeated elsewhere. On the 28th day of the same month in the same year blood descended



again before Govinda, while in 1851 A.D. all three gods, Govinda, Pākhangbā and Sanāmahi were involved (*CK* p. 306). Pākhangbā is mentioned in this connection on at least two other occasions (*CK* for 1852 A.D. p. 310 and for 1888 A.D. p. 475).

What is the meaning of this peculiar phrase, 'blood descended'? The Manipuri *i tāba* implies literally 'blood fell, descended', or, more loosely, 'to bleed, to let blood fall'. It is also used in a technical sense, of the male, to mean 'to leave issue, to have progeny'. In the case of the *lāi* the phrase was used when a new representation of the god was made whenever a clan split up. The new representation of the clan god would be taken by the breakaway party, and the *lāi* concerned would be said to *i taie*, 'bleed, have progeny'. There can be little doubt that this is the meaning of the phrase in the passages above. What we have to do with here is a proliferation of images, both Hindu and Meitei. For our purposes however the significant point is the very close conjunction between the *lāi* and Govinda. Both sets of deities are now worshipped side by side, without their respective origins being stressed. A conflict between Hindu gods and Meitei *lāi* was now no longer felt; two originally quite distinct sets of gods have been merged into a generally accepted Manipuri Hindu Pantheon. The religion of Manipur in this period managed to draw effectively from both traditions, and to fuse them into a workable synthesis. The newer faith had not eradicated the ancient gods, nor (except in a very limited sense) had it identified Meitei *lāi* with Hindu gods. It had preserved those *lāi* which were seen to be of basic importance in the culture of the people, and had placed side by side with them Govinda, Rādhā Chaitanya and a host of other Hindu deities. In this way the religious traditions of Manipur had been preserved while at the same time adopting the tenets of Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism.

### (c) *The Synthesis*

How are we to describe such a synthesis? It can hardly

now be denied that the Manipuris are Hindus—although, as we have tried to show, theirs is a type of Hinduism rather different from that met with elsewhere in India, in which the ancient faith and festivals play an important role. How to define the religion of Manipur was a question which vexed the earlier British observers, and was the subject of a spirited exchange between Shakespear and Hodson.<sup>12</sup> The latter (1911 : 97) describes Manipuri religion as 'animism', a description with which Shakespear found it impossible to agree. Shakespear cites the devotion to Kṛishṇa among the people, the learnedness of many of the Brahmins, and the zeal for cow protection as ample evidence that the Manipuris merited the title 'Hindu' (1913 : 451). Hodson defended himself in a brief note which was published in the same volume of *Folklore* as Shakespear's article (1913 : 409ff). He claimed the authority of McCulloch for his views.<sup>13</sup> McCulloch had in fact cited (1859 : 17-18) as evidence that the Hinduism of the Meiteis was superficial, the abandon of the worshippers at the *Lāi Harāoba*, the fact that children up to the age of ten or twelve did not observe Hindu food restrictions and the lack of respect shown to Brahmins. He also refers to the absence of child marriage and *satī*, and the authority of the *rājā*, rather than the Brahmins in (indiscriminately) giving the sacred thread. Hodson is in agreement with McCulloch over the laxity of Manipuri Hinduism :

12 Shakespear was Political Agent from 1905-8 and again from 1909-14. Hodson spent rather less time in Manipur as a *chota sāhib* only. He was apparently of a rather fiery Irish temperament which did not always commend him to the indigenous population. His book was published after he had left Manipur and had taken up a lectureship in anthropology. While it contains some useful information it is not always accurate in details, and has been responsible for perpetuating the erroneous spelling 'Meithei' for Meitei.

13 Col. John McCulloch was Political Agent from 1844-62 and 1863-7 (not 27 years as stated by Hodson). McCulloch showed a very acute interest in Manipur, wrote the erudite *Account of the Valley of Munnipore* and spoke Manipuri fluently. He married a Manipuri lady and eventually retired to Shillong with the rank of Colonel.

'It is difficult to estimate the precise effect of Hinduism on the civilization of the people, for to the outward observer they seem to have adopted only the festivals, the outward ritual, the caste marks, and the exclusiveness of Hinduism while all unmindful of the spirit and inward essentials.'  
(1910 : 96)

It seems inconsistent for him to continue, after having delineated these outward marks of Manipuri Hinduism :

'In Manipur, where Hinduism is a mark of respectability, it is never safe to rely on what men tell of their religion ; the only test is to ascertain what they do, and by this test we are justified in holding them still to be animists.'  
(1910 : 97)

This looks self-contradictory, if it is precisely these outward forms—presumably 'what they do'—which characterise their Hinduism. Hodson's point seems to be that Manipuri religion was Hindu in form only, not in doctrine and learning. In this respect he may well have been partially correct, although the large amount of literature in Manipuri seeking to support Hindu beliefs and practices would suggest that there was, even at the beginning of the twentieth century, a reasonably able literary movement on the orthodox Hindu side. He is again no doubt right in claiming that Manipuri Hinduism was more outward and ritualistic than philosophical (1913 : 520-1), but in this it was probably no different from Hinduism elsewhere in India. If it is accepted that Hinduism (as any world religion) modifies itself in different regions, then there can be no serious objection in describing Meitei religion as Hinduism. It is certain that the term 'animism', however defined, describes neither the original religion of Manipur nor its present brand of Hinduism. There are certainly places where Manipuri Vaishnavism differs from the main stream of classical Hinduism, and some of these have already been mentioned—the position of women, the absence of *sati*, the relative ease of divorce and so on. But these are social aspects which are scarcely sufficient to deny to the Manipuris the name of Hindu. The cardinal aspects of Vaishnavism are

clear and evident, such as the primacy of the worship of Kṛishṇa and Rādhā and the religious fervour during *Kīrtans* and festivals. What we have in Manipur is the synthesis of two faiths, which has taken place gradually, as we have seen, over a fairly long period of time. Aspects of the traditional religion have fallen away in this process, just as certain aspects of classical Hinduism have never gained full acceptance. The result is an amalgam, in which the peculiar cultural and religious genius of the Meiteis has helped to shape the kind of Vaishṇavism which is now dominant. Hinduism in Manipur is not a mere veneer, as Hodson seems to suggest ; it has been fully integrated in Manipuri religion as an essential factor in the faith and life of the people. The fusion of the two religious traditions has been well summed up by S. K. Chatterji :

‘Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Meithei religion with its gods and goddesses and myths, its own legends and traditions, its social customs and usages, and its priest and ceremonials, and of Brahmanical Hinduism with its special worship of Rādhā and Kṛishṇa. (1950-288)

It is this synthesis which is today the essence of the religion of Manipur.

## ADDITIONAL NOTE ON THE WORSHIP OF ŚIVA AND DURGĀ IN MANIPUR

In the main body of our historical survey of the development of religion in Manipur we have dealt primarily with the rise of Vaiṣṇavism in the state. There were also other aspects of Hinduism which affected Manipur at various stages during its religious history and which today are of some importance. The most significant of these is the worship of Śiva and of his consort. Some Manipuri scholars have laid great emphasis on the place of Śiva and Durgā in the Manipuri tradition and have claimed that the worship of these deities was very ancient. A prominent Manipuri writer, E. Nilakanta Singh, thus suggests :

‘The pre-historic period of Manipur proves the wide prevalence of Shaivism and Tantric cults. On many a hill top there remain still Shiva lingas, whom people on special occasions, worship and pray to. The Manipuri equivalent of god is *lāi* which is a corrupt form of *Linga*.’  
(1961 : 30)\*

Similarly certain aspects of Manipuri mythology seem to give an important place to Śiva. Some of these legends show a marked tendency to identify Śiva and Durgā with traditional gods. One of these is discussed at length by S. K. Chatterji (1950 : 223ff. ; and 1962 : 37-8). According to this account Śiva and Umā descended to Manipur on Nongmājing hill, and then selected some particular hill areas for their abode. Śiva is, on this account, credited with having introduced the *Rās* into Manipur. Having seen the *Rās* of Kṛishṇa and the *gopīs*, Śiva and Umā sought a suitable place where they too could perform the dance. Koubru hill (the abode of a traditional *lāi*) was decided upon, but found to be too wet. So the land was dried up by the agency of Kṛishṇa himself and then, at the very dawn of creation, sanctified by the dance of Śiva and Umā. This legend, which is very popular in Manipur, seeks

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\* The etymology would not, we believe, be acceptable to philologists. Although the word *lāi* can also mean ‘genital organs’.

to trace the origin of the *Rās* back to Śiva, the Lord of the Dance, and to justify the claim that Śaivism was introduced into Manipur at a very early date.

The legend as it now stands gives the appearance of being of a comparatively late date. It must have arisen later than the beginning of the Vaishṇavite period in view of the reference to the *Rās* of Kriṣṇa and the *gopīs*. Such an allusion would have been impossible before the time of Garīb Niwāz. Furthermore the legend in question identifies the newly-arrived Śiva with the ancestral culture hero Poireiton, which looks like a later conflation of distinct traditions. Nowhere is this identification made outside the Śaivite corpus of legends, and Poireiton is so un-Śaivite a figure that the identification is almost certainly primarily concerned with justifying a claim that Śiva is as ancient a deity in Manipur as was Pākhangbā. The choice of Nongmajing as the place of the descent of Śiva is evidently an attempt to identify him with Nongpok Ningthou, the romantic hero-god of Meitei mythology, whose headquarters was originally Nongmajing. These attempts to associate Śiva with ancient figures in Meitei pre-history are probably evidence that the protagonists of Śaivite religion at the time when the legends in question were compiled were attempting to establish a very ancient pedigree for Śiva worship. If however the legends themselves are not earlier than the beginning of the eighteenth century we are not justified in taking them as proof that Śaivism was well established earlier than this date.

We have discussed above the evidence produced by Yumjao Singh with respect to Śaivism and Durgā worship. The Phayeng Copper Plate affords us evidence that there was an attempt to resuscitate the worship of these deities during the reign of Chandra Kīrti, and we shall see that it was certainly during his reign that festivals were introduced in honour of Śiva. The stone conch of Mahādev, if Yumjao's dating of the *Shagok shading* is correct here, would be rather earlier, during the period of Charai Rongba. There is certainly evidence, as we shall see, of temples to Kālī being

erected at this period. If we accept Yumjao at this point Śiva worship came in at first about the same time, and thus Vaishṇavism, Śaivism and Kālī worship entered Manipur all during the same period. However the bulk of the evidence for Śaivism is of a much later date, and the allusion to the conch of Mahādev in the book *Shagok shading* should perhaps be treated with some reserve.

Further evidence for Śaivite worship has been seen in the many stones on hill tops which are the objects of worship. E. Nilakanta Singh (1961 : 30) describes these as *lingas*. This is not entirely obvious, for in shape many of these stones do not necessarily resemble the linga, and in any case some mother goddesses are known to have had stone pillars erected in their honour, which could quite easily be mistaken for phallic emblems (Bhattacharya 1971 : 60). Further, in view of the importance of stones in the pre-Hindu period, the presumption is that these hill top stones were not originally regarded as lingas, although as Śaivite religion progressed they could easily have come to be regarded as such by later generations.

Another approach to the problem of the date of the introduction of Śiva and Durgā worship into Manipur is through the festivals. As we have seen, each of these Hindu gods has a festival in his or her honour. Śiva is worshipped at *Baruni*, a festival which seems to have been imported into Manipur from Bengal. According to the Census Report (1961 : 10) Baruni is not an indigenous festival : it was introduced during the reign of Chandra Kīrti, who also commissioned the construction of the shrine of Śiva on Nongmāijing. We also know from the *OK* that temples of Śiva were built about this time (*OK* for 1844 A.D., p. 262). These facts, taken in conjunction with the probable dating of the Śaivite Phayeng plates, gives us a strong presumption that Chandra Kīrti actively encouraged the cult of Śiva.

Durgā worship seems to be rather older than that of Śiva. Here however there are difficulties of identification. There is little evidence of the early presence of a Mother Goddess in

Manipur, such as the fierce deities of Bengal and Assam.<sup>14</sup> The present festival of Durgā Pūjā has, we have seen, both a household and a public aspect, and orthodox households today worship Durgā on the 7th day of each month. The main temple of Durgā has an interesting history. It is situated at Hiyānthāng, about six miles south of Imphal. Originally this was a shrine of a local *lāi*, with the influence of Hinduism she became associated with Durgā. In contrast to many representations of Durgā, the attributes of the goddess of Hiyāngthāng are peace and graciousness. In one prayer offered to her the worshippers request :

‘O Mother, thou art merciful. Be gracious and forgive our sins. Drive away passions and desires that destroy the purity and calmness of our heart. Through thy profuse grace may we live in peace.’ (quoted in Census 1961 : 18)

The problem in dating the appearance of the Durgā cult in Manipur is one of identification : when did the *Hiyāngthāng lāirembi* become regarded as Durgā, the spouse of Śiva ?

There is some documentary evidence for the advent of Śiva and Durgā worship in the Chronicles. Kālī worship was evidently present at the beginning of the Hindu period. In Charai Rongba’s reign a Kālī temple was begun (1707 A.D.) which collapsed the following year. It was rebuilt and dedicated by the champion of Vaishṇavism, Garīb Niwāz, and dedicated in 1716 A.D. Kālī therefore evidently had a place in Manipur fairly early in the eighteenth century. It is clear that at this stage she was not identified with the goddess Pānthoibi, for the latter appears as a separate and still Meitei deity in 1708 A.D., and later. Nor does the identification appear in the influential book *Pānthoibi Khongul*.

14 For a Survey of the subject of the Mother Goddess in India see Bhattachārya 1971. Unlike the Bengali Kālī and the Assamese Kāmākhā there is no animal sacrifice to the Manipuri goddess. Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1968 p. 91) points out that in the Harappā excavations a large number of terracotta female figures have been discovered which are taken to be a manifestation of the Great Mother Goddess. There sometimes appear with a lump representing a child, but there is no emphasis of the genitive organs.



We have seen that a good deal of the evidence for Śiva worship emanates from the reign of Chandra Kīrti; this period also seems to have marked an increased importance in the status of Durgā. By 1855 A.D. (*CK* p. 327) the *Hiyānthāng lāirembi* had become identified with Durgā and was receiving the Hindu pūjā of the milk of one hundred and eight cows. Some years later a Durgā temple was erected at Jiri (*CK* for 1868 A.D., p. 379). By this time then Durgā worship was well established, and had taken over the traditional Mother Goddess cult. We know for certain that the *Hiyānthāng lāirembi* became known as Kāmākhyā prior to this (*CK* for 1843 A.D. p. 260) and it is therefore probable that we have to reckon with a progressive development. First the traditional *lāi* became identified with the Assamese Kāmākhyā, then subsequently was identified with Durgā. The reign of Chandra Kīrti seems to be the most likely time when the latter step took place. The question of Pānthoibi's identification with Durgā is much more recent, and the motives behind it are very obscure. There is little similarity between the romantic legendary figure of Meitei mythology and the spouse of Śiva. However since Pānthoibi did become the greatest goddess in the Meitei pantheon the move to identify her with Durgā has perhaps taken place on this score alone. It should be stressed however that this identification is very recent. It had not fully taken place in 1913 when Shakespear published his article on the religion of Manipur (Shakespear 1913 : 433) It can be regarded as the result of the forcible attempt to Hinduize Manipuri traditional gods which has characterized the writings of the late Atombapu Sharma. The conflation of Śiva with Nongpok Ningthou is still unaccepted by the majority of the Meitei.<sup>15</sup>

The material available to us does not permit us to conclude that Śaivism and Durgā worship are any older than

15. The representations identifying Pānthoibi with Durgā and Śiva with Nongpok Ningthou in the temple of Atombapu Sharma, found in Chatteerji (1967 : plate V), are of very recent manufacture.

Vaiṣṇavism in Manipur. It may tentatively be suggested that Durgā worship was introduced late in the reign of Charai Rongba and the goddess was subsequently conflated with the *Hiyāngthāng lāirembi*. Śiva worship entered at a rather later date. If the evidence has been understood rightly it was during the long reign of Chandra Kīrti, during the nineteenth century, that these deities were given strong royal patronage and thus attained more widespread popularity.

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*Nongchup Haram* (Migration from the West).

## GLOSSARY OF MANIPURI TERMS

apokpā	ancestor or progenitor
barti	cotton fibre wrapped around short sticks and soaked in ghee
chang	1) the bodyguard of the <i>hitongba</i> , crew leader in the boat race. 2) odd numbers
cheithāba	1) the oracle for the year 2) the man after whom the year is named
ching	hill
hanjaba (fem. hanjabi)	court official
hāo	hill man
heibi	medlar, tree with a small fruit resembling an apple
heikru	small edible fruit, <i>emblica officialis</i> .
hingchābi	witch, vampire
hongba	to dedicate
ihāifu	earthen pot joined by a thread to the leiyom as used at Lāi Harāoba
ishāifu	pot used for carrying water from the place of <i>ikouba</i> at the Lāi Harāoba
jagoi	dance
kangla	the area of the old palace
kabok	puffed rice
khāyom	packet consisting of seven layers of banana leaf containing rice, egg and lāngthrei buds, tied with bamboo strips
khurumba	to bow down, worship
konyāi	gold and silver coins
lāi	god, deity
Lāi Harāoba	the festival of 'pleasing the god'
lāiningthou	god-king : applied to both gods and kings
lāipham	an area sacred to the lāi
lāirembi, lāirema	goddess, female lāi

lāisang	shrine
lalup	forced labour system
leiyom	three layers of banana leaves containing lāngthrei buds as used in Lāi Harāoba
māibā	priest
māibi	priestess
māikei-ngākpa	gods who guard the directions
mayang	non-Manipuri of Indian origin
nāktha	left side of the verandah in a Meitei house
ningthou	king
nonglāoba	lit. shouting for rain ; used of the cultic shouting of abuse
pana	division of the people into four groups for administrative purposes
pena	one-stringed fiddle played at Lāi Harāoba and other festivals
phanek	ankle-length skirt consisting of two pieces of material joined lengthwise, often with elaborate embroidery
piba	eldest or chief male of the sagei
sagei	clan, group bearing the same family name
sageilāi	
(yumjāolāi)	lāi (male and female) of the sagei
salāi	yek
sel	bell-metal coin
tāiren	plant, cedrela toona
thabal chongba	dance in which the participants join hands in a circle ; lit. dancing by moonlight
thouniba	to appease
umang lāi	lit. forest deity, used of lāi in wider sense
yāosang	1) Meitei festival which coincides with Holi 2) small hut burnt at this festival
yek	the seven divisions of Manipuri society, roughly equivalent to tribes
yumsengba	purification rite after childbirth.

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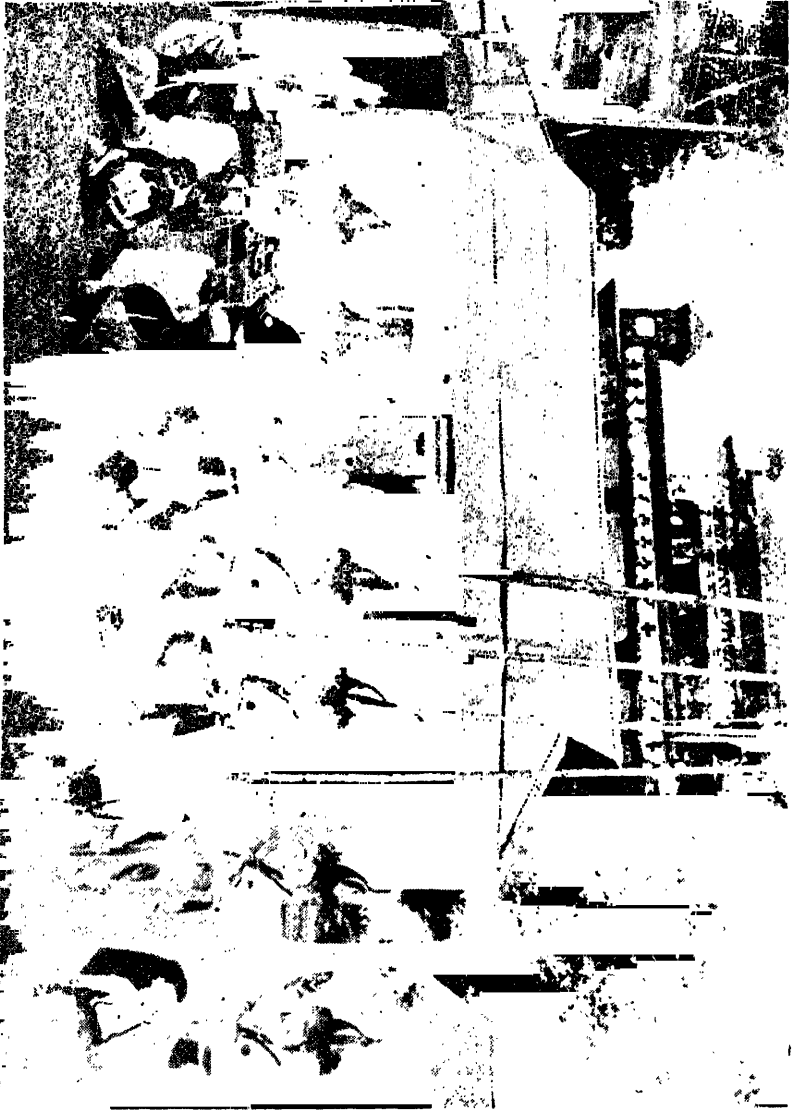
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2	Fn. 5	Tangkhol costume	Dress similar to Tangkhol costume
5	2	credit	credit
	Fn.15	see Grierson's	see Grierson
9	14	Nongpok,	Nongpok
12	5	although	although
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108	Fn.7	779	799
113	Fn.5	was	war
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169	18	Ck. p.119	Ck. p.473
175	18	flower water	(flower water)
176	31	Rādhā Chaitanya	Rādhā, Chaitanya
183	7	<i>lāi</i>	<i>lāi</i> Heipop Leima
190	21	<i>India,</i>	<i>British India,</i>



Khamba-Thoibi dance with Penakhongba (Publicity Dept., Government of Manipur)



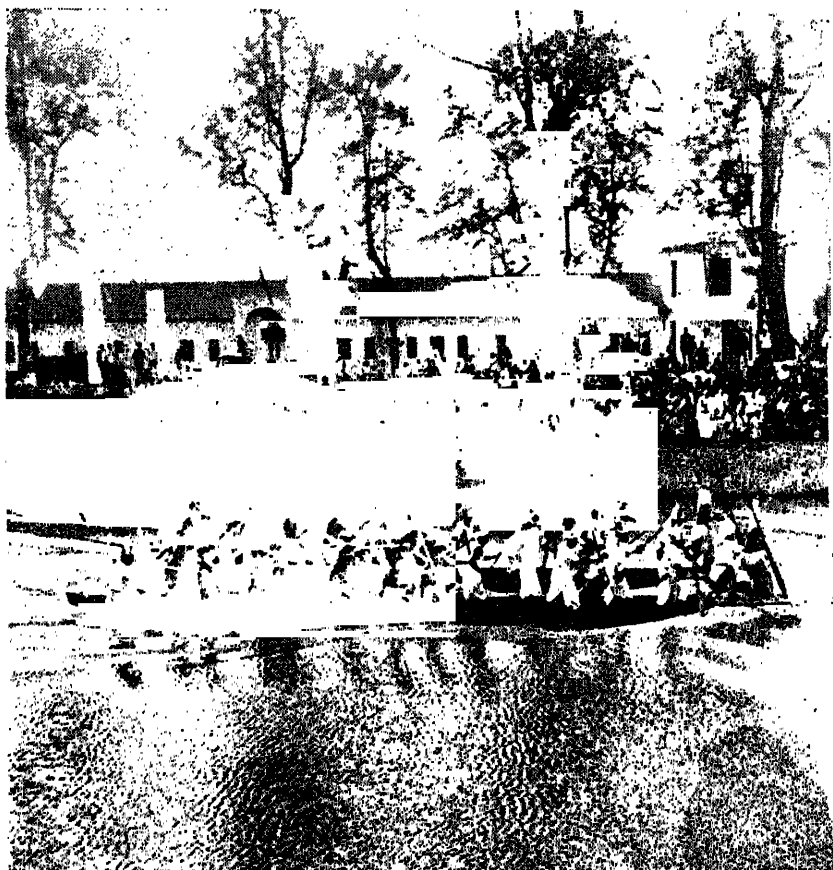
Moirāng Harāoba at Thangjing Temple (Publicity Dept., Government of Manipur)



Kongba Leithong Phātpa (See Chapter 3)



Cheithāba (The incoming and the outgoing Cheithāba)  
(See Chapter 3)

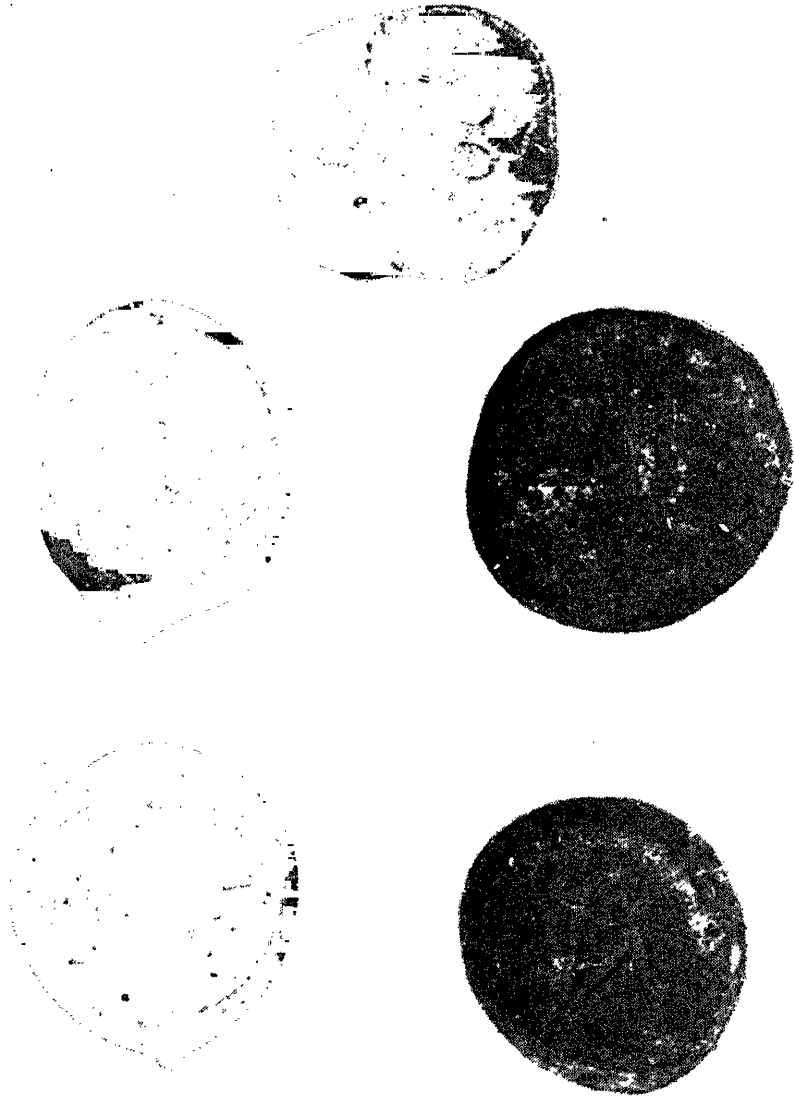


Boat race (See Chapter 3)

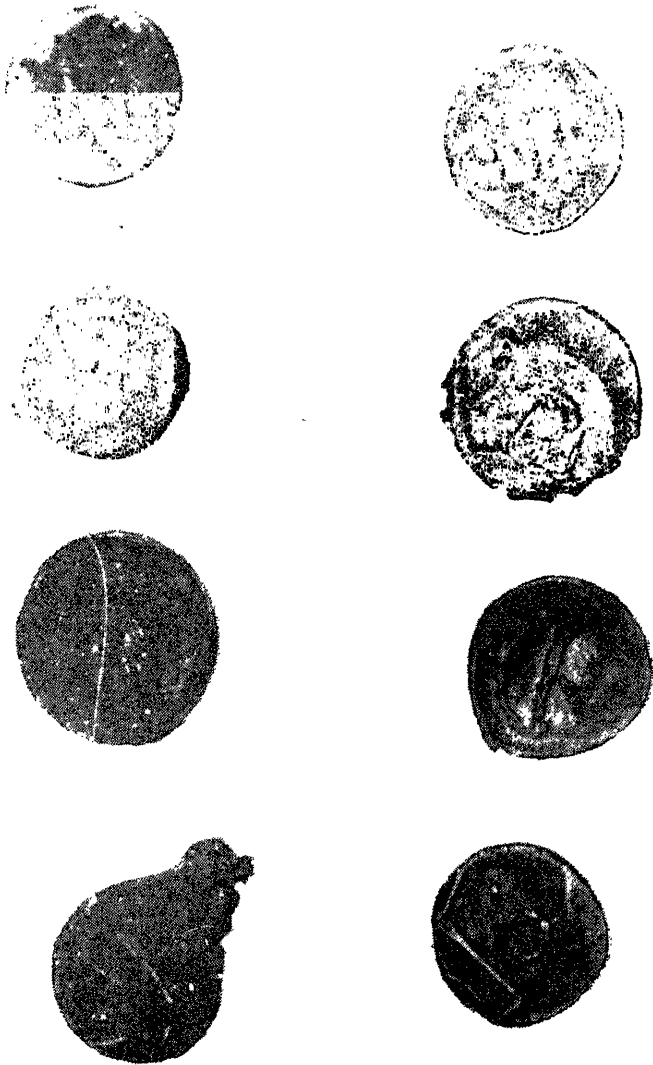




Lāi Ikouba (See Chapter 3)



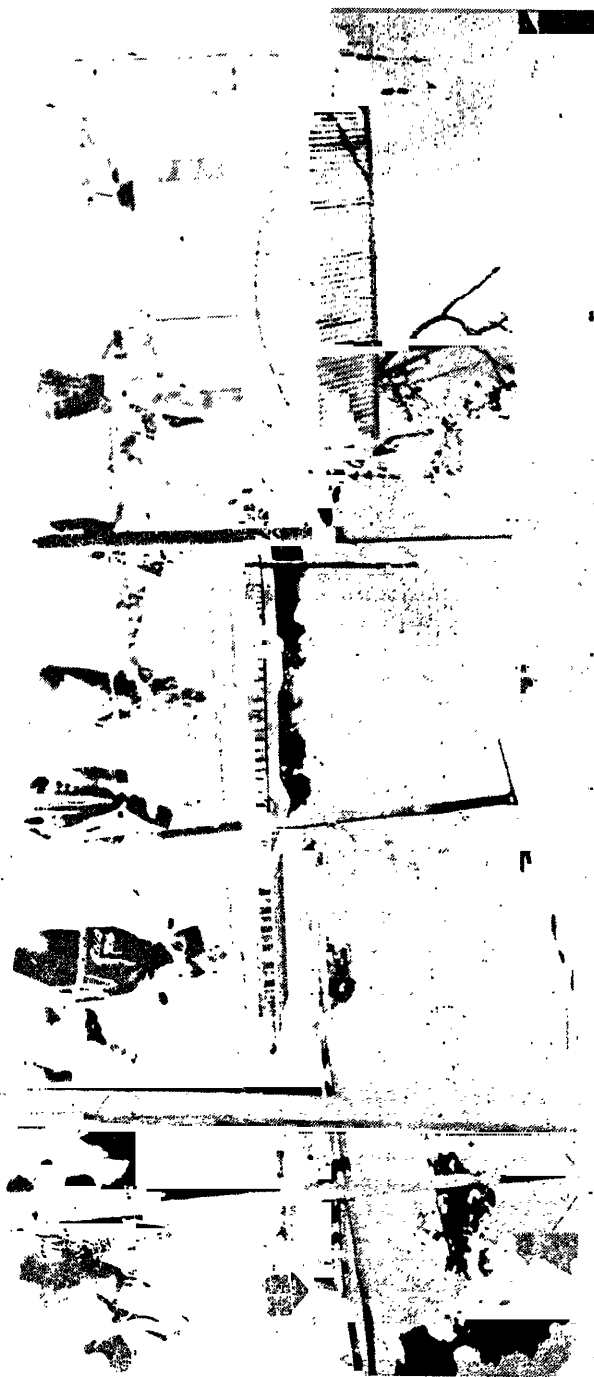
Sanāmahī Coins



Set of 8 divining coins used by Mäibis



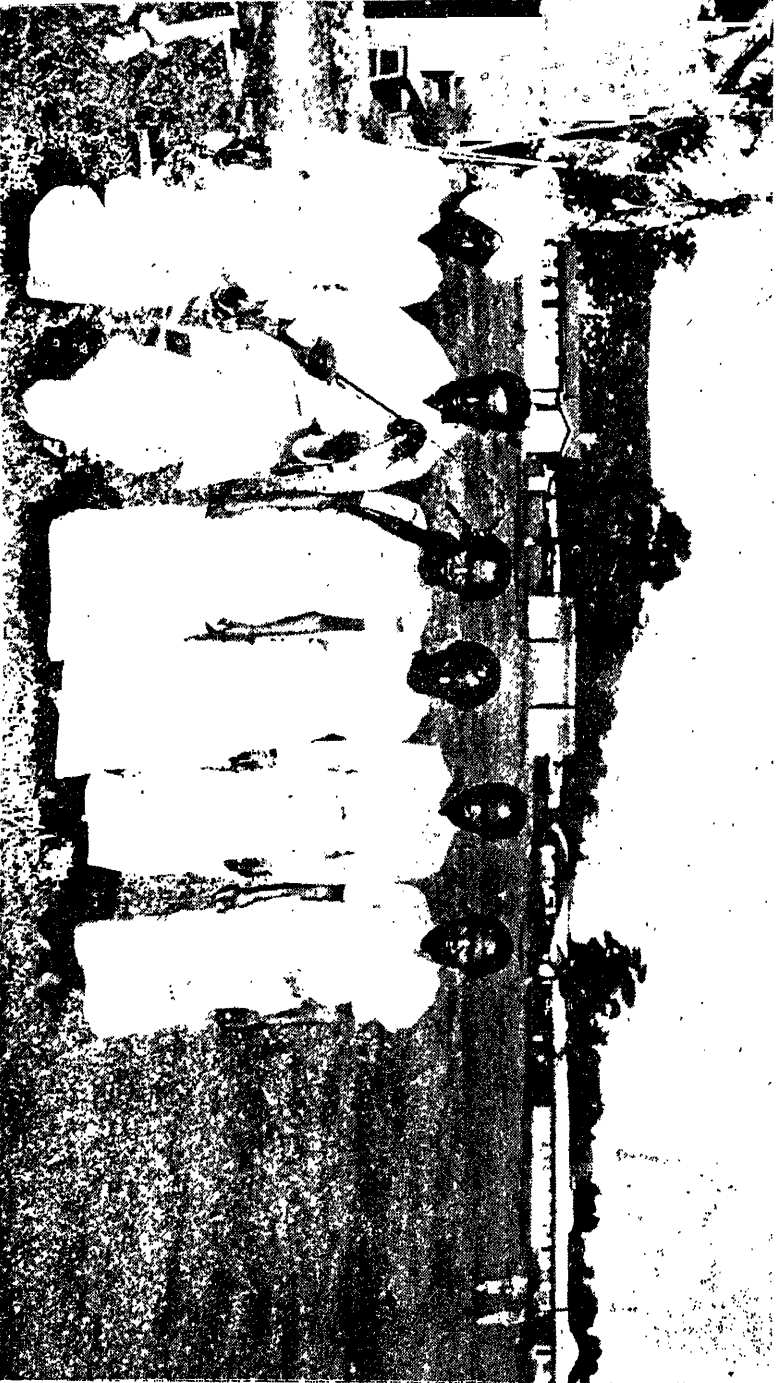
Two girls worshipping Siva stone at Cheirāoching



Maibis dancing at Lahirāōba



Mäibi uttering the taibao (oracles) ; offerings shown before the Mäibi at a Lāiharāoba



Māibis and Penakhongpa and a Māiba



The grove of the Konthoujam Lāirembi (Umang Lāi)  
(Photographer : K. Ibohal Sharma of X Studio, Imphal)





Kāirenkāijao (Bearing the coffin). (See Chapter 5.)



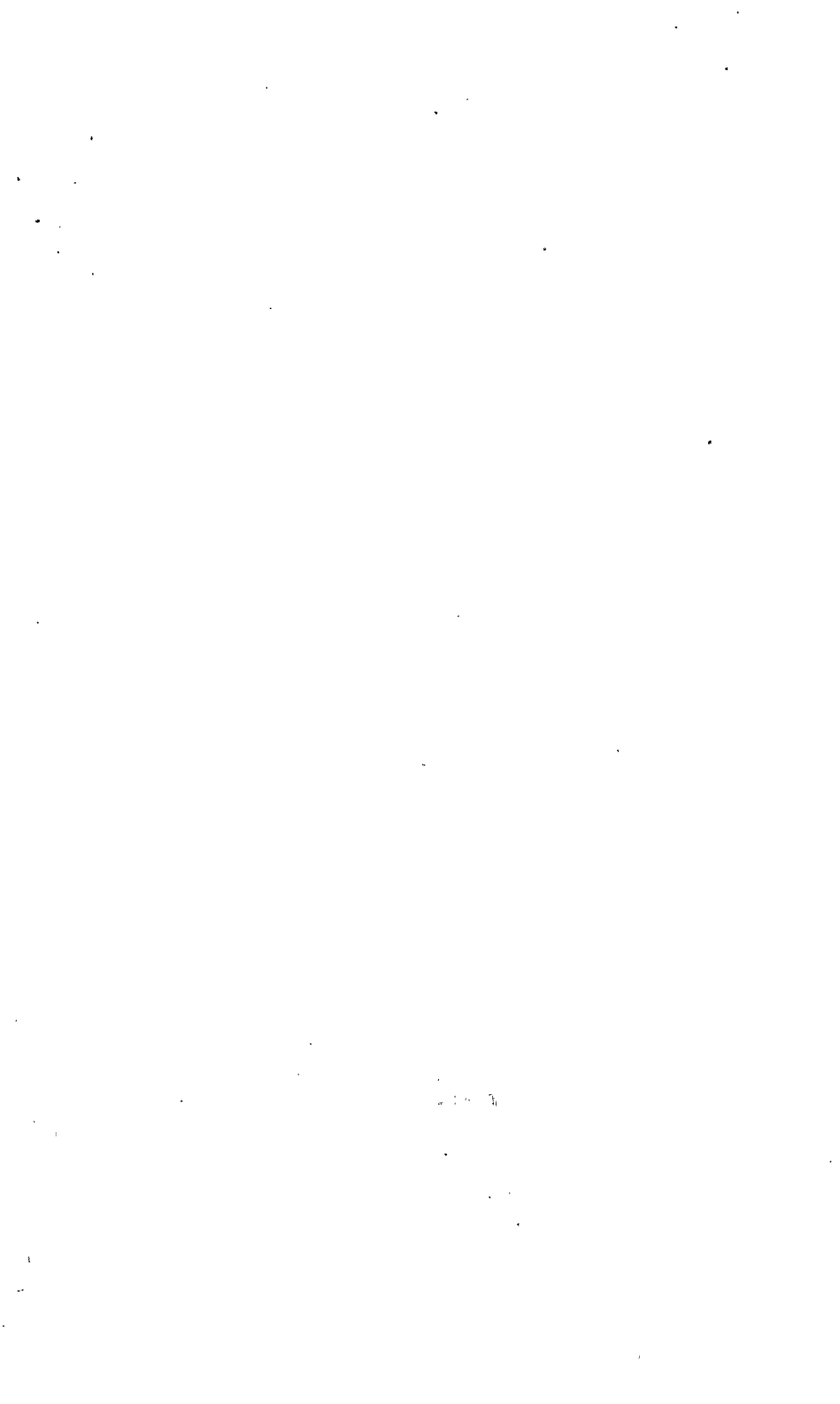
Khāngpok (See Chapter 5)



Komāi or masks as used now at the Lāiharāoba

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